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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DEC. 1978
VOL. 42, NO. 12

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DEATH IN XANADU

by BRETT HALLIDAY

When a wealthy newspaper publisher hires Shayne to run down whoever is trying to kill him, the redheaded detective learns the hard way that his own life is very much on the line . . . . . 4 to 43

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Death in Xanadu

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Duncan Harrison Had Everything Going for Him—Including an Unidentified Would-be Murderer. Which Was Why He Hired the Miami Redhead...

MIKE SHAYNE LEANED BACK in his chair, contemplating the early afternoon sunlight through his office window. It was a beautiful spring day in Miami, and the detective was beginning to wish he had followed his instincts and left the office to Lucy. It had been quite a while since he had been out fishing.

As the redhead was thinking along those lines, the door to the outer office opened and Lucy Hamilton came into the room.

He put his feet back on the floor and said, "What's up, Angel?"

"There's a lady out there who wants to see you, Michael," she said. Shayne thought he detected a slight negative emphasis on the word "lady." Lucy continued, "She says her name is Cynthia Rawlings, but she won't tell me why she wants to see you."

Shayne was curious about a woman who could provoke such a negative reaction in Lucy. He straightened his tie and said, "Show the lady in."

Shayne rose to greet Cynthia Rawlings as she entered the office. He gestured for her to be seated.

He studied Cynthia Rawlings as he settled back into his chair. She was unquestionably a beautiful woman. In her early thirties, she had shining blonde hair and a slimly opulent figure.

Shayne leaned back and said, "What can I do for you, Miss Rawlings?"

"Actually, I'm not here on my own behalf, Mr. Shayne. My employer wants to hire you."

"And who's that?"

"I'm Duncan Harrison's private secretary.

Shayne frowned slightly. He had heard the name, all right. Duncan Harrison owned newspapers all up and down the East Coast.

He said, "I know who Harrison is. What's he want with me?"

"He'd prefer to tell you himself," Cynthia Rawlings replied. "He hopes you'll come back with me to Xanadu, so that he can

explain the situation in person."

Xanadu? The name struck a slight responsive chord. Shayne searched his memory and came up with an answer.

"Xanadu — that's Harrison's estate, right?"

"Yes. Would you agree to that, Mr. Shayne?"

"Why couldn't Harrison come to see me himself? Not that Cynthia Rawlings is not a charming substitute."

She smiled. "Mr. Harrison is a reclusive man, Mr. Shayne. He's found a place in which he's comfortable, and he sees no reason to leave."

"So the world must come to him." There was disapproval in Shayne's voice.

"He pays very well. Most people don't mind."

Shayne sat up straight and said, "I can recommend some other detective agencies, Miss Rawlings. I don't think I'm interested."

Cynthia bit her full lower lip with even white teeth. "I'm sorry," she said. I didn't mean to sound patronizing. Mr. Harrison really wants you. He said you were probably the only man in Miami who could save his life."

Shayne studied her for a moment with his grey eyes. She didn't impress him as trying to flatter him. He read nothing but sincerity in her face.

"Okay," he said abruptly. "I'll go see the guy."

Cynthia looked relieved. She said, "Can you come back with me right now?"

"I suppose so."

"I've got the limousine downstairs.

Shayne shook his red head. "I'd rather drive myself. You can show me the way."

"I suppose that will be all right."

Shayne stood up and plucked his hat off the hatrack. He opened the door for Cynthia and, as they went through the outer office, said to Lucy, "Miss Rawlings and I are going to see her boss, Angel. He's Duncan Harrison, the newspaper publisher. I probably won't be back today."

Lucy nodded coldly. Shayne wondered what underlay her instant dislike for Cynthia Rawlings.

He gave a mental shrug and followed Cynthia out of the office.

II

SHAYNE ROLLED the window of the Buick down and let the warm breeze blow in his face as he drove south out of Miami. Cynthia didn't seem to mind the wind.

"Harrison had this Xanadu built from the ground up, didn't he?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, he bought the land and had everything done to his specifications. The estate covers about a hundred acres."

Shayne nodded. He was running through his mental files on Duncan Harrison. The publisher owned nearly a dozen newspapers,

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some inherited from his father, more acquired after the death of the elder Harrison. Duncan was still a relatively young man who had augmented a considerable inherited fortune.

When they had gone about ten miles, Cynthia said, "The entrance is on the left."

The detective slowed down. A high metal fence had bordered the road for several hundred yards, and now, just ahead, he could see big wrought-iron gates. They were set between two tall stone pillars. A large sign on the fence beside the gate proclaimed *NO TRESPASSING.*

The gates were closed. Shayne brought the Buick to a stop in front of them. Cynthia took a small black box from her purse and pressed a button set in one side. The gates swung open.

"Transmitter?" Shayne asked, nodding at the box.

Cynthia nodded. "The gates won't open unless you have one of these."

As he drove in on the wide driveway, the redhead studied the layout. Well-kept green lawns stretched out on both sides of the drive. Ahead, the road cut through a high, thick hedge. The hedge continued on both sides of the drive, making an impenetrable border. Shayne could see a huge, four-storied mansion at the end of the drive.

"Quite a place, isn't it?" he commented.

Cynthia said, "Mr. Harrison has moved around a lot. Xanadu is the home he's always wanted."

Shayne brought the car to a stop in front of the house and went around to open the door for Cynthia. As he did so, he heard strange noises from behind the hedges. He could have sworn he caught the shrill chatter of a monkey, the rusty roar of a lion.

He jerked a thumb at the noises, said, "What the hell is that racket?"

"You'll see, Mr. Shayne. Mr. Harrison takes great pride in all his possessions."

She led Shayne into an entrance hall that was lined with paintings and statuary. Shayne didn't have much of an eye for art, but even he could tell they were expensive.

The rooms in Xanadu were all high-ceilinged and echoing. There was a musty smell in the air, and the redhead felt vaguely uncomfortable. Cynthia led him up a wide staircase with elegantly carved banisters to the second floor. They followed the balcony around to a large room that led out onto a terrace.

Standing at the balustrade that surrounded the terrace was a tall, thick-waisted man with greying hair. He had his back to Shayne and Cynthia, was looking out into the area surrounded by the hedges.

Cynthia said, "Mr. Harrison — Mr. Shayne is here."

Harrison turned to greet them. He thrust out a hand and said, "Mike Shayne! Glad to meet you. I'm Duncan Harrison."

Shayne returned the strong grip. "I hear you want to hire me."

"That's right." Harrison pulled a cigar from his jacket and offered it to Shayne. The rangy detective shook his head, pulled out his own cigarets.

When both men had lighted up, Harrison continued, "I've heard good things about you, Shayne. I hear you're smart and can be rough if need be. That's the kind of man I need right now."

"What's it all about?"

"Somebody wants to kill me, Shayne. You find out who and take care of it, and I'll pay you twenty thousand dollars."

Shayne took a deep drag on his cigaret and tugged the lobe of his left ear thoughtfully. "Tell me about it," he said. He was hearing the animal noises again.

Harrison waved a hand at the grounds of the estate. "This is my home, Shayne. Take a look."

Shayne stepped up to the railing and glanced down. All through the enclosed area were cages of all shapes and sizes. Inside the cages was the most off-beat collection of animals the redhead had ever seen outside of a zoo. He spotted two lions, a zebra, a giraffe and numerous monkeys.

"My personal menagerie," Harrison said. "Two weeks ago, someone set fire to the hedge. The servants put it out before it could do much damage. Four days later, someone got in at night and shot one of the baboons. A week ago, one of the lions was poisoned. Yesterday, someone took a shot at me."

"Where were you?"

"Out back, by the pool."

Shayne nodded. "Somebody's after you, then. Setting the fire and killing those animals were warnings. Once they start shooting at you, they're playing for keeps."

"Will you try to find out who it is? I want him behind bars, Shayne. Attacking me like this in my own home is unendurable!"

"Okay. I'll try to dig your man out." Shayne found an ashtray on a table and stubbed out his cigaret. "Do you have any idea who might have it in for you? I'll need someplace to start."

"Three men have threatened me recently. I had Miss Rawlings prepare files on them."

Cynthia had been waiting unobtrusively in the background. Now she handed Shayne a folder. Within were pictures of three men and several sheets of typewritten paper.

"Those are Gerald Benton, Ross Demery, and Fred McCulloch," Harrison said.

Shayne turned the pictures over and saw a name written on the back of each. He said, "I recognize Demery. He used to be a

State Senator, didn't he?"

"Yes, and a poor one. My papers supported his opponent in the last election. I personally wrote several editorials during the last campaign, exposing Demery's corruption."

"He lost by a landslide, if I remember — right?"

"Yes, and he blames it on me. He's stated more than once that he would get even with me."

"And the others?"

"McCulloch used to own this property, before I bought it to build Xanadu. He couldn't keep up the taxes and lost it. His resentment over that has turned against me. He's quite a fiery character, Shayne."

"What about this last one — Gerald Benton?"

Harrison waved a hand in dismissal, "I only included him to make the roster complete. He's a drunken old man. That's why I fired him when I took over the Miami *Post*. It had stagnated under his editorship until it was ready to collapse. I brought in my own team to straighten things out.

"He's too ineffectual to be a real threat, but he did say on one occasion that he'd like to see me dead. The addresses and phone numbers of all three are there."

Shayne closed the folder. "I'll check on these three. Another possibility you have to consider is that it could be an inside job. Who else lives here at Xanadu?"

Harrison's face took on a truculent expression. "That won't be necessary, Shayne. I trust everyone here."

"Just because *you* do, doesn't mean *I* have to." Shayne's direct, unsmiling gaze bore in on Harrison.

"All right — all right." Harrison gave in. "My wife Janice lives here, of course. And the servants live in — there's a butler, a cook, a chauffeur and four maids. Miss Rawlings has a room for when she has to stay overnight. That's all."

"What about gardeners? And who handles those animals?"

"The people who take care of that come in during the day."

Shayne nodded, said, "I'd like to see the pool and get an idea of what happened when you were shot at."

"My wife can fill you in on that. She was there when it happened."

Harrison took a checkbook out of his pocket and scribbled a retainer. Shayne took it, folded it, slipped it into his pocket. "You'll be hearing from me," he said. "In the meantime, try to stay indoors. Don't make a target of yourself."

Harrison nodded. The detective turned and followed Cynthia Rawlings back through the elaborately furnished house.

They went downstairs and out through a rear door. The lawn in back was sweeping, with clumps of trees and bright flowerbeds filled with exotic blossoms. Off to the right lay a large swimming

pool. The water was bright blue and sparkled in the sun. Lounges were scattered on the tile patio.

Only one of the lounges was occupied, Shayne noticed as they approached. A young woman was reclining face down. The upper half of her bikini was unfastened, exposing all of her well tanned back to the sun's rays.

She lifted her head to look curiously at the new-comers. Heavy dark hair fell to her shoulders. She was in her mid-twenties. Shayne stopped and admired the sleek lines of her body.

"Mr. Shayne," Cynthia Rawlings said, "This is Janice Harrison. Mrs. Harrison, this is Mike Shayne."

"The private eye?" Janice Harrison sat up holding her bikini in place, and swung long legs off the lounge. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Mr. Harrison has hired Mr. Shayne to find out who's been doing all those awful things," Cynthia said quickly. She moved a step closer to Shayne.

Janice stood up, revealing the fact that she was taller than Cynthia. She said, "I hope you find out fast. It's not a nice feeling, knowing there's some nut with a gun out there somewhere."

"Maybe you can help *me*, then," Shayne said. "Were you out here yesterday when the shooting took place?"

"Yes — we were swimming. The shot came out of nowhere."

"When was this?" Shayne asked.

"About seven, yesterday evening."

"You were both in the water?"

"*I* was," Janice said. "Duncan was sitting in that lounge over there. I was just about to come out of the pool — in fact I was halfway up the ladder — when something buzzed right past me and hit the patio."

She pointed at a long scratch in the tile, "It hit right beside Duncan. I jumped back in the pool."

"Did you hear a shot?"

"No — whoever it was must have used a silencer."

Shayne studied the set-up around the pool and used the bullet mark on the patio to give him an idea of the direction of the shot. It seemed to indicate that the bullet had come from the rear of the estate.

Shayne scanned the area, noting the small creek that ran behind Xanadu and the low brush-covered rise that lay on its far side. He doubted that he would find anything there, but asked Cynthia and Janice to wait for him while he looked.

He was right. After tramping through the bushes for several minutes, he decided he was wasting his time and hiked back to the mansion. When he got to the pool, he found that only Janice Harrison was there.

"Where's Miss Rawlings?" he asked.

"She went back inside. I suppose the sun was too much for her. These fair-skinned creatures can't stand much heat, you know."

Shayne ignored the implied put-down. He said, "Keep your eyes open, Mrs. Harrison. If somebody's gunning for your husband, they might not be too careful about who gets in the way."

"I'm sure you'll find him, Mr. Shayne. I have great confidence in you."

There was a look of interest in her eyes. The redhead had seen many times before. It occurred to him that he might have a problem when this case was over. He turned and walked back to the house.

Cynthia was waiting just inside and it was obvious from the look on her face that she had overheard Janice Harrison's comment. She said, "I think I should tell you, Mr. Shayne, that Janice Harrison has a talent for embroidery."

"You mean she's not telling a straight story about the shooting?"

"No. What she told you agrees with what Duncan — Mr. Harrison — told me. But I *would* be careful about anything else she says."

"I'll keep that in mind, Miss Rawlings."

"Please, call me Cynthia."

"Okay, Cynthia. I'll get back to town now and check on these leads Harrison gave me. I'll give you the same advice I gave Mrs. Harrison. Be careful and keep your eyes open. You're just as dead when it's an accident as when it's on purpose."

III

SHAYNE'S HEAD was full as he drove back toward Miami. He had seen and heard some things at Xanadu that offered food for thought. Most notable was the friction between Janice Harrison and Cynthia Rawlings. He didn't know the background of that situation, but he would have to find out.

Another area to explore lay in the way Harrison ran his business. Nobody got to be that rich without making enemies, Shayne mused. There could be many more people who would wish Harrison ill besides the three the tycoon had mentioned. The place to check them out was with Tim Rourke, who knew the local newspaper scene inside out.

It had to be someone with a definite grudge against Harrison. The arson and the killing of the animals could have been part of an extortion scheme. But if that were the case, there should have been a demand by now. In all probability, someone was out for revenge.

That's what Shayne was thinking as he cruised along, not paying close attention to the road. A bridge spanned a small channel immediately ahead. There was a stand of trees on either side of the road.

Suddenly, a small hole appeared

in his windshield. Small bits of glass spattered the detective. He jammed on the brakes, causing the Buick to slew from side to side. The shot had come from ahead, so he spun the wheel hard to the right, swinging the car around sideways.

As it came to a stop, he ducked and rolled across the seat, pulling his Colt .45 from its shoulder holster as he did so. He opened the door on the passenger side and dropped out behind the car.

There were no further shots. Shayne glanced cautiously around. He saw cars coming from both directions on the road, but it would be seconds before any of them arrived.

He decided the gunman must be hiding in the trees by the channel. Poking his gun and one eye around the front of the car, he triggered off four fast shots, two into the trees on each side of the road.

There was no return fire.

He heard a car engine roar into life, then the spat of gravel spraying beneath spinning tires. He rose quickly but carefully, in case it was a trick, barely caught a glimpse of a car speeding off. It was an anonymous dark blue.

Shayne put back his gun and returned to the car, brushing bits of glass off the seat disgustedly. The bullet had gone completely through both front and back windshields. It was mere luck that it hadn't gone through his head in between.

The rest of the drive into town was uneventful. Shayne parked the car in the basement garage of his apartment hotel and asked the attendant to see about getting the glass replaced.

When he had gone upstairs to his apartment and fixed himself a drink, he lifted the phone and dialed the City Room at the Miami *News*.

"Dirkson, City Desk," came the reply.

"This is Mike Shayne, Carl. Is Tim around?"

"Nope, he left a little while ago. Anything I can do for you?"

"Thanks. Just tell him if he shows up in the next few minutes that I'm looking for him."

"Will do."

The redhead hung up and tried Rourke's home number. There was no answer there. That left only one probable place.

The Beef House on Miami Avenue was Rourke's and Shayne's favorite watering hole. The detective took a cab over there, was not surprised to find the reporter in their regular booth, a glass of rye in front of him. Shayne sat down across the table from the lanky reporter, said, "Hello, Tim."

"Hi, Mike. How goes it with Miami's best-known shamus?"

Shayne grinned. "He needs some help from Miami's best-known boozehound reporter."

"Ask away."

Shayne signalled the bartender,

who sent over the usual, a double Martell on the rocks with ice water chaser. The detective sampled it approvingly, then said, "What do you know about Duncan Harrison?"

Rourke downed a large gulp of whiskey. "He runs the competition here in town and also a lot of other sheets between here and Boston. You working for him or against him?"

"For him. Somebody's taking pot-shots at him, and he hired me to grab the character before he hits the target. Do you know anybody who might have a grudge against him?"

Rourke laughed shortly. "If you've got to check out everybody who's ever been sore at Harrison, you've got a year's work in front of you."

"Not well-liked, huh?"

"You *could* say that. His dad was fairly well off and left him a few papers, but he built the bulk of his money by acquiring failing newspapers and making them pay off."

"How'd he manage that?"

"By cutting every corner he could find. By taking advantage of people. By using the type of screaming yellow journalism that went out years ago. He's a latter-day William Randolph Hearst or Charles Foster Kane."

"Hearst I've heard of. Who's Kane?"

"You know, in the movie, *Citizen Kane.*"

Shayne shook his head.

Rourke shrugged. "Kane was a fictional character based on Hearst. He tried to buy love with money. He built a big fancy house. Hearst had his San Simeon. Kane had his —"

" — Xanadu," Shayne guessed.

"I thought you hadn't seen the movie."

"That's what Harrison calls his place."

"Yeah, I've heard about it. It's supposed to be quite a spread."

"It is." Shayne lit a cigaret. "Harrison put me onto a guy named Benton — used to be editor of the *Post*. Know him?"

"Jerry Benton? Sure, I know him. Now there's a good living example of how Harrison makes enemies. Benton was at the *Post* nearly twenty years. The paper was in trouble through no fault of his, but when Harrison came in and bought it, the first thing he did was boot Benton out, for no good reason. I heard Jerry was pretty bitter about it."

According to Harrison, he was a drunk."

"He *drank*. There's a difference. Hell, Mike, you know how it is. Cops and reporters and private eyes drink. We see the world the way it is. We've got to do something to keep us from going crazy along with it."

Shayne ran a thumbnail along his jawline. "Maybe so, but I'll have to talk with him anyway. You know where he hangs out?"

"Yeah, he's a widower, and lives in an apartment. I can give you the address."

The detective copied it down in his notebook. It matched the address in the file prepared by Cynthia Rawlings.

Rourke ordered another drink and said, "So somebody's out to get Harrison. You sure he's not just being paranoid?"

Shayne finished his cognac and rose. "Pretty sure," he replied. "Right after I left Xanadu, somebody took a shot at me."

He left Rourke sitting there, gaping.

IV

THE EVENING rush hour was at its height, and it took Shayne's cab a long half hour to make its way across town to the rundown neighborhood where Gerald Benton lived. The enforced inactivity while the taxi crawled through traffic chafed him as did any kind of delay while he was working on a case.

Finally, they arrived. The redhead paid the driver, then turned to study the building where Benton lived. It was a seedy four-story rooming house whose better days were long gone.

Benton's apartment was on the third floor. Shayne rode up in a self-service elevator. It let him out in a dim hallway lit by sparse 25-watt light bulbs on the ceiling. The narrow corridor made Shayne feel claustrophobic.

He pounded his big knuckles on the door of Apartment 3-C. There was no response from within. He waited a long moment, knocked again, then slid a piece of hard plastic out of his wallet. The flimsy lock was forced easily.

Shayne put his hand inside his coat and let his fingers rest lightly on the butt of his gun. He swung the door open, stepping quickly over the threshold and off to one side.

A resounding snore echoed through the room. The detective straightened, walked over to the bed to look at its occupant. The man lying there had untidy white hair and several days of stubble on his hollow cheeks. His skin was pale, almost translucent. An empty gin bottle lay beside him on the bed.

As Shayne looked down, the rheumy eyes popped open and fixed the big redhead with a gaze of startling clarity. Benton said, "Who're you?"

Shayne said, "Are you Gerald Benton?"

The old man nodded shakily.

"You knew Duncan Harrison," Shayne continued. "You threatened to kill him." It wasn't a question.

"He fired me. . . No cause for it. . . That paper was all I had, it was my life."

"Where were you this afternoon about three?"

"I was here. I'm always here."

Shayne quirked his stomach dis-

gustedly. He could tell that Benton had been drunk all day. It was not likely that the old man had been out taking shots at anybody. While he couldn't write him off completely as a suspect, Shayne was more than willing to put Benton at the bottom of the list.

He left the building rapidly. Hunger was beginning to growl in his stomach, but he decided to check on Ross Demery before he dined.

The ex-politico had gone back into the real estate business after his election defeat. He had been a successful land salesman before he went into politics. Shayne reflected wryly that sometimes the main qualification for both jobs was the same — a fast glib tongue.

Shayne took his notebook from his pocket. He had copied down all the addresses and phone numbers Harrison had given him. Finding a phone booth in a drug store, he dialed the number of Demery's office, even though it was past closing time.

There was no answer. Shayne hung up, redeposited his change, and tried Demery's home. This time it was picked up on the fifth ring. The quiet voice of a maid answered.

"Demery residence."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Demery, please," Shayne said.

"May I tell him who is calling?"

"Yeah. Tell him it's Mike Shayne."

The maid put the phone down and Shayne listened to several minutes of silence before someone else came on the line. He lit a cigaret while he waited. Then the phone said, "Mike Shayne? This is Ross Demery. What can I do for you?"

The redhead exhaled, said, "I'd like to talk to you if you don't mind. In person."

"What's it about, Mr. Shayne? My wife and I have guests right now. . ."

Shayne decided to forge straight ahead. "It's about a threat you made on Duncan Harrison's life."

Demery was quiet for a moment, then asked, "Are you working for Harrison?"

"Yes."

"I don't want anything to do with Harrison *or* his flunkeys. Good-bye, Shayne."

"Now just a damn minute!" Shayne's voice was sharp and made Demery pause. Shayne could hear him breathing. "Get this straight. I'm not anybody's flunkey. Somebody's trying to kill Harrison and he hired me to find out who. If you don't want to talk to me, that's going to look pretty suspicious."

"Dammit, Shayne —"

"Harrison is keeping it private right now, but he could go to the cops with this. His paper could play it up big. You're a logical suspect, Demery. You're just getting back on your feet again. Could you stand the bad publicity?"

Demery's voice sounded tired

when he replied. "All right, Shayne. I don't have anything to hide. You can come over and I'll answer your questions. I live in Bal Harbour."

"I know the address. I'll be there as soon as I can."

The detective hung up. He was getting tired of catching cabs. He stopped at a hotel and rented a car. All they had available was an aging Corvair. He took it anyway, thinking that he had a personal score to settle with whoever had shot at him, over and above Harrison's assignment.

He wished he had thought to ask Tim Rourke about Demery's background. During the drive to Bal Harbour, he tried to recall what he had heard about the man and his career.

To the best of his memory, Demery had served three terms in the State Senate. It was during the third term that his corruption, in the form of influence-peddling, kickbacks and the like, had surfaced. While the Harrison papers' opposition to him had been both sensational and scandal-mongering, it was his own culpability that had, in the long run, defeated him.

One of the interesting things that had emerged during the various investigations of Demery's activities was a rumor that some of his backing had come from Mob money. If the rumor were true and Demery did have underworld connections, he wouldn't have any trouble obtaining a triggerman. He could have his revenge on Harrison and never soil his own hands in the process.

Mike Shayne found Demery's big Bal Harbour home without any trouble and parked at the curb in front. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, the front door of the house opened. The man who came through it was florid-faced and bore the beginning of a paunch. He wore slacks and a sports shirt and carried a drink in his right hand. He came down the walk to meet the redhead.

"I'm Demery," he said. "I know you're Shayne — I've seen your picture in the paper. What do you want?"

Bluntly, Shayne said, "Somebody took a shot at Duncan Harrison yesterday evening at seven o'clock. The same thing happened to me about three this afternoon. Can you prove where you were at those times?"

"Why should I tell *you?*"

"To save yourself a lot of trouble."

Demery's mouth twisted in a crooked grin. "It just so happens that I *can* prove where I was then. Yesterday evening, I was having dinner with two of our city councilmen. This afternoon, I was at my office. A dozen people will swear that I didn't leave until five o'clock."

Shayne wrote down the names of the two city councilmen, then said, "You had your alibis all prepared, didn't you?"

Demery's fingers whitened as he clenched the glass in his hand. "Don't push it, Shayne," he said. "Sure, I hate Harrison. It was his lying newspapers that cost me my office. If he dropped dead tomorrow, I'd laugh. But I'm not trying to kill him."

Shayne locked eyes with Demery. After a moment, the other man pulled his eyes away. The detective said, "Harrison has hired me to get to the bottom of this, and I will. If there's anything you don't want me finding out on my own, you'd better tell me now."

Demery finished his drink and laughed nervously. "I told you I've got nothing to hide," he said. "Snoop around all you want to, just don't bother me while you're doing it. Now I'm going to get back to my guests."

He turned and walked back into the house without another word.

Shayne leaned a hip against the Corvair and watched Demery's retreating back contemplatively. The man had a big chip on his shoulder, and he would definitely bear some further checking out.

Right now, however, the redhead's hunger pangs were getting insistent. Shayne drove toward his apartment, intending to shower and change clothes before he went out to eat.

He parked the car on the street when he arrived and went up the rear stairs, bypassing the lobby. He was loosening his tie with one hand, putting the key in the door with the other, when he realized something was wrong. He suddenly stood very still.

The sun had gone down while he was talking to Demery. It had grown darker while he drove home. Now the hallway was dim enough that he could detect a tiny strip of light coming from under the door.

He hadn't left any lights on.

Shayne drew his Colt, gripping it firmly. The key was already in the lock, and he had made enough noise inserting it to alert whoever was inside. He twisted the doorknob sharply, flung the door open, stepped back, expecting the immedite racket of gunfire.

When none came, he took a deep breath and went through the door in a dive.

Rolling as he landed, he detected movement to his left and came up in a crouch, holding the gun steady and his finger poised on the trigger.

Cynthia Rawlings stared down the barrel and said in a small voice, "Oh, my goodness!"

V

MIKE SHAYNE said, "*Damn!*"

He straightened and holstered his gun, said, "Popping up unexpectedly is a good way to get yourself killed. What are you doing here?"

"I called your secretary, Miss Hamilton, and got your address

from her. She didn't want to give it to me, but I told her it was very important."

"What's up? Another attack on Harrison?"

"No, nothing like that. I just felt like I had to talk to you. There are a few things I think you should know."

Shayne hung up his hat, said, "The first thing I'd like to know is how you got in here."

"The man at the desk downstairs let me in. He said he'd tell you I was waiting here when you came in."

Must be a new man, Shayne thought. Aloud, he said, "Will these things you have to tell wait a while?"

Cynthia's forehead creased in a frown. "I suppose so. Why?"

"Give me a few minutes to clean up and you can tell me all about it over dinner."

She broke into a smile at that.

Shayne showered and put on fresh clothes. It was a short drive to The Beef House. Shayne looked around when they walked in. Tim Rourke was nowhere to be seen.

When they were in the booth and drinks arrived — a martini for Cynthia, a double Martell for Shayne — he said, "All right, now you can spill whatever's on your mind."

She sipped at her drink, said hesitantly, "This afternoon, when I . . . warned you about Janice Harrison, I'm afraid I didn't tell you everything."

"Now would be a good time to do it, then."

Cynthia took a deep breath, said, "I know Mr. Harrison told you the people he suspects. Benton, Demery, McCulloch. But if anything were to happen to Dunc — Mr. Harrison — Janice would benefit more than anyone else."

"Mr. Harrison's will leaves everything to her?"

"Yes — he just had it changed. They've been married only six months."

Shayne said casually, "She's quite a bit younger than he is. And attractive, too."

"You think she's attractive?"

"Yeah, she's pretty enough in a kiddy-car kind of way."

"Exactly! She's a child, I tried to tell Duncan that." She smiled ruefully. "I suppose you think I'm a jealous bitch, don't you?"

"Do you have any reason to be jealous?"

Cynthia took another deep breath. "Duncan Harrison and I were very close. Then he found Janice, and suddenly they were married, I suppose I'm letting our breakup distort my perceptions."

Shayne shrugged. "Not necessarily. Janice has a legitimate motive. But how do you explain the fact that she was with Harrison at the time of the shooting?"

Cynthia's blue eyes narrowed in thought. She said, "She could have an accomplice. That shot

could have been meant to keep anyone from suspecting her. The next one might not miss."

Shayne signaled their waitress. "I appreciate your opening up like this, Cynthia. The more cooperation I get from everybody, the sooner I'll get to the bottom of things."

They dined well, and the redhead filled her in on his visits to Benton and Demery, emphasizing Demery's belligerent attitude. He didn't mention anything about his having been a target himself that afternoon.

Lighting an after-dinner cigaret, he said, "I'll dig up McCulloch first thing tomorrow and get his story. I want to check out Denery's alibis, too."

"What will you do then?"

"If I can't come up with anything, Harrison may have to go underground. If we make him hard to get to, that might push the gunman into making some kind of desperate move. Usually when somebody's out for revenge, he won't stop at anything."

"You think it's someone with a grudge against Duncan, then?"

"That's most likely on what we have so far — although we can't count out somebody like Janice."

He stubbed out his cigaret and continued, "Do you have to go back out to Xanadu tonight?"

"No, I have a place here in town. I really should be getting back there, too. I have some work to do tonight."

"Some of Harrison's stuff?"

"Yes, some letters."

"You're really dedicated to your job."

There was pride in her voice as she replied, "I'm the best secretary Duncan Harrison has ever had."

She offered to take a cab home, but Shayne wouldn't hear of it. He signed the tab and escorted Cynthia back out to the Corvair.

She sat close to Shayne as he drove to her apartment. He could tell that she was attracted to him. He was not surprised when she asked him up for a nightcap.

The apartment house wasn't far from the beach — two stories arranged around a courtyard with a swimming pool in the middle. Shayne parked the car and followed Cynthia up the outside staircase to the upper floor. Her apartment was in the middle of one wing.

"I hope the place isn't too messy," she said as she unlocked the door. "I stay here part time, at Xanadu the rest. When you get into the habit of having a maid, you have a hard time cleaning up after yourself."

"Don't worry about it," Shayne told her.

She swung the door open and reached inside to turn on the lights. Shayne stepped in right behind her. His eyes scanned the room quickly.

A TV-stereo combination was on

the right hand wall, a bar and sofa on the left. The soft carpeting and the expensive prints on the walls told Shayne the lady liked luxuries. Her place didn't look the least bit messy to him.

Across the room were sliding glass doors that looked out toward the bay. The thick curtains were open, and the redhead could see a glittering panoply of lights from the oceanfront hotels. Cynthia hurried across the room, evidently intent on closing the curtains.

Before she got there, a bullet punched a neat hole radiating jagged cracks in the glass, and a metal bee buzzed past Shayne's ear. Cynthia screamed.

Moving almost too fast to be seen, the detective swept a hand behind him and slapped the light switch, plunging the room into darkness. He leaped toward the place where Cynthia had been and bumped into her. They both fell to the floor. There was another crack as a second bullet pierced the glass.

Mike Shayne laid a strong hand on Cynthia's shoulder and rapped, "*Stay down!*" He scuttled on hands and knees toward the window. There was plenty of light coming in from the outside for him to see where he was going.

When he reached the window, he grabbed the curtain cord and yanked it, slamming the drapes shut. A third shot hit the window as he did so.

Flattening himself on the floor, Shayne called to Cynthia, "Crawl into one of the other rooms. *Stay low!* When you get there, lie on the floor."

He pulled the curtain back a fraction of an inch at the bottom and peered out into the Miami night. Directly across the street was an office building. Undoubtedly, the shots were coming from there.

He lay there watching for several minutes, but there were no more shots. He backed away from the window and called out, "*Cynthia!* Are you all *right?*"

Her voice came from his left. "I'm fine! Should I come out?"

"You stay *put!* I'll be back as quick as I can."

"Mr. Shayne, what are you going to do? Mr. *Shayne — Mike?*"

He was already out the door of the apartment, running back to the staircase, gun in hand. He went down the stairs three at a time and raced across the courtyard.

He slowed as he reached the corner, hugged the building as he looked out at the street. There was nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual nighttime traffic.

Shayne took a deep breath and plunged into the street, cutting across toward the office building. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. No further shots came.

He could see the entrance to a parking garage underneath the building. He angled for it and was only thirty feet away when a car suddenly shot up the ramp. The

headlights picked him out and, with squealing rubber, the car changed directions and came barrelling down on him.

That was enough for Shayne. Nearly blinded by the bright beams, he squeezed off two quick shots and threw himself to one side. The car rocketed by, close enough for him to reach out and touch it. He rolled in the street and came up firing, pausing just long enough to make sure there were no innocent bystanders in the way.

The shots, if they hit, had no effect. The car whipped around a corner and sped away, leaving Shayne with only a vague impression of a dark sedan. He put his gun away, brushed himself off, uttered a resounding "*Damn!*"

That made twice in less than twelve hours that he had been shot at. He didn't like it a bit!

VI

DOORS HAD OPENED during the shooting, and the redhead was the object of quite a few curious stares as he stalked back to Cynthia Rawlings' apartment. He stepped inside and shut the door, flipping on the lights.

"Mike?" Cynthia's voice came questioningly from the bedroom.

"Yeah, it's me. You can come out."

He crossed to the window, sweeping the drapes partially open, and scowled at the bullet holes. When Cynthia came into the room, he said, "I'm afraid whoever it was ruined this window. There's a hole in the curtain, too."

Cynthia stood staring at the destruction with a faraway look on her face. When she finally spoke, there was no fear in her voice, only savage anger.

"*Damn!* Oh, damn it *all!*"

Shayne was looking at the places on the opposite wall where the three slugs had buried themselves. He spotted a telephone on a table and picked it up.

"What are you doing?" Cynthia asked.

"Calling the cops. Somebody else around here probably has by now. They'll spot the bullet holes in that window, anyway, so it'll look better if we call them ourselves."

"What will you tell them?"

"Don't worry about that. Just follow my lead."

Shayne talked briefly to a desk sergeant. Ten minutes later, a patrol car arrived, followed closely by an unmarked detective sedan. Shayne knew the two plainclothesmen on a nodding basis, the two patrol officers not at all.

"I'll tell you all I know, boys," he said. "Miss Rawlings here has been receiving some threatening phone calls, and she hired me to look into them. We had just come in from having dinner tonight when somebody started using us for target practice."

He pointed at the building

across the way, added, "I figured the shots were coming from over there, so I tried to make it across. A car came out of the garage and nearly ran me down. Sorry, but I didn't get a description or license number."

The detectives wrote it down in their notebooks and asked a few perfunctory questions, then dug the spent bullets out of the wall for ballistics tests. Cynthia corroborated Shayne's story, and it wasn't long before they had the apartment to themselves again.

"Why didn't you mention anything about Duncan?" Cynthia asked when the police had gone.

"Harrison wouldn't have called me in if he hadn't wanted this thing looked into quietly," Shayne answered. "He could have gone to the cops from the first if he had wanted to. Until something happens to warrant otherwise, I'm going to respect my client's wishes and try to keep his name out of any police report."

"What should I do now?"

"I wouldn't stay here tonight. The gunman was after me, not you, but there's no sense taking chances. He might come back, and I'd rather neither of us was here. Pack a bag, and I'll take you to a hotel."

Cynthia threw some things in a suitcase and Shayne drove her to a nearby caravanserai. He saw her safely up to her room, then turned to leave as soon as the bellboy had gone. Cynthia put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Mike," she said softly, and suddenly she was in his arms, kissing him. He returned it for a long moment, then drew away to look into her eyes. "Be careful," she whispered.

He nodded, said, "You, too," and left quickly, shutting the door behind him and waiting until he heard her lock it.

He lit a cigaret when he got back to the car and puffed on it. A lot had happened since Cynthia Rawlings had come into his office early that afternoon. The two attempts on his life proved that someone wanted Duncan Harrison very badly and was willing to kill anyone who might possibly interfere.

There were two good suspects in Ross Demery and Janice Harrison. A not-so-good possibility was Gerald Benton. Fred McCulloch was still an unknown quantity.

Shayne stretched. All he wanted to do now was shower again and get some sleep. He was tired, and he had bruised a shoulder when he dodged the speeding car and landed in the street. He started the Corvair and headed home.

When he arrived and parked the car near his hotel, he cast a wary eye around before he got out. Nothing looked out of place. He opened the car door.

The dome light came on and a shiny something caught Shayne's eye. It was wedged down in the back of the seat. All he could see

was the shine of metal. The redhead reached for it cautiously.

He almost laughed aloud a second later when he pulled it free. It was a ring of keys, no doubt fallen from Cynthia's purse. He dropped them into a pocket.

After he had let himself into his apartment, tossed his hat on the rack and made himself a drink, he decided he had better call Cynthia and let her know he had found the keys. She might miss them and worry.

Shayne lifted the receiver and dialed. When the hotel operator answered, he gave the number of Cynthia's room.

The line was busy.

He tried again, five minutes later, with the same results. After thirty minutes and two more tries, he gave it up. She was probably on the phone with Harrison, filling him in on the night's events. Or she had left it off the hook. Shayne tossed the keys in the air once, then put them back in his pocket.

He stretched again, finished his glass of cognac, headed for the bedroom and some well-deserved rest.

VII

THE SUN CAME UP bright over the ocean the next morning. Shayne felt rested, even though his shoulder had stiffened during the night. He fixed himself coffee, then went to the telephone. He still had to let Cynthia Rawlings know that he had found her keys.

He was informed, when the hotel answered, that Miss Rawlings had already checked out. He shrugged and hung up; he planned to go out to Xanadu as soon as he had talked to Fred McCulloch. He would return the keys to her then.

Shayne put on his hat and took the elevator to the basement garage. He said to the attendant, "Any idea when my car will be ready?"

"The guys from the glass company are supposed to be here this morning. Mr. Shayne," the boy said. "They ought to have those windows replaced by noon."

Shayne sighed, waved a hand and strode up the ramp to the street.

The address Harrison had given him for McCulloch was in a lower-class suburb north of town. Shayne piloted the Corvair toward it. He would be glad when he got his Buick back — the small car cramped his long legs.

McCulloch's house was on a side street. It was a small white frame gone to seed, virtually identical with the others on the street. In contrast to Ross Demery's neighborhood, where Jaguars and Porsches had been evident in abundance, the cars parked on this street were battered old Fords and Chevrolets. Shayne found a place at the curb between two of them in front of the

house where Fred McCulloch lived.

He went up a concrete walk that had broad cracks running through it. The front door was open and, through the screen, he could hear the sound of a TV games show. He knocked loudly on the door facing.

A man's voice floated out from somewhere inside. "Yeah?"

"Mr. McCulloch?"

The man appeared in a doorway across the room. He was tall and thin and wore a white undershirt over rumpled slacks. As he approached the front door, Shayne could see that he was about sixty years old, with a gaunt face and still-dark hair shot through with white.

The redheaded detective said, "Fred McCulloch?"

"That's right. Whatever you're selling, I can't afford it."

"I'm not selling anything, Mr. McCulloch. My name is Mike Shayne, and I'd like to ask you some questions about a property you used to own."

McCulloch stepped up almost against the door and peered at Shayne through the screen. "Property? What property?"

"It's called Xanadu now."

McCulloch spat out an epithet. "That's not my land anymore. A low-down bastard stole it from me!"

"That's not the way I heard it," Shayne countered, "but regardless of that, somebody's trying to kill Duncan Harrison. He says you threatened him. What about it, McCulloch?"

"Damn right I threatened him! That land was in my family for generations. My grandfather built his house on it, the house where my father was born. It burned down years ago. My wife and I always dreamed about rebuilding it, but we never had the money. I'm glad she didn't live to see that monstrosity of Harrison's!"

Shayne could see the hatred burning in McCulloch's eyes. He said, "Somebody took a shot at Harrison day before yesterday —"

"Did they hit him?" McCulloch cut in.

"No."

"Too bad. *I* would have. I *hit* what I aim at."

"Were you aiming at me yesterday afternnon and last night?"

McCulloch ignored the question and said, "I recognize you now. You're that detective who's always in the newspaper. I've read about some of the things you've done. I never thought you'd sink low enough to work for a man like Harrison!"

Shayne had enough of this. His temper flared and he snapped, "Now look, McCulloch — "

"No, *you* look!"

The older man's action took Shayne by surprise. He swung the door open suddenly. The corner of the door frame struck Shayne sharply in the head, knocking his hat off and making him stagger backwards a step. McCulloch fol-

lowed him out, fists flailing.

The unexpected ferocity of the attack kept Shayne off-balance for a moment. But then he planted his feet, blocked one of McCulloch's blows with a forearm, and shot a punch of his own in. His hard, knobby fist clipped McCulloch on the jaw, knocking him back against the door. The redhead followed the blow to the jaw with a solid punch to the stomach.

Shayne stepped back, fists still clenched, as McCulloch doubled over, gasping for air. He said, "Show some sense, McCulloch. If you're after Harrison, give it up now, before somebody gets hurt bad."

"Never . . . shot at Harrison . . . would've hit him if . . . I had," McCulloch replied haltingly.

"Where were you the day before yesterday, in the evening?"

McCulloch pointed across the street. "I was at Charlie Garrity's house. There's a poker game there nearly every night. Must be half a dozen people can swear I was there. You check. You'll see."

"Don't worry, I will." Shayne pointed a finger. "Don't forget what I said. If you've got some kind of vendetta against Harrison, it might be *you* that gets hurt in the end."

He left McCulloch standing there and went across the street to the house McCulloch had indicated. A short, bald man answered his knock.

"You Charlie Garrity?" Shayne asked.

"Yeah. What can I do for you?"

"My name's Mike Shayne." Recognition flared in Garrity's eyes. "I'm working on a case, and I'd like to ask you a question."

"Sure. I'd be glad to help, Mr. Shayne."

"Was Fred McCulloch here about seven P.M. the day before yesterday?"

"That's seven in the evening? Yeah, he was here. The boy's had a game going. You know how it is?"

"Did he leave at any time during the evening?"

"Not that I remember."

"Okay, thanks." Shayne turned to go back to the car.

"Did that help you, Mr. Shayne?"

"Sure, Charlie, you were a big help."

You helped complicate things, he thought as he got into the Corvair, noticing that McCulloch had gone back inside. Even though McCulloch's temperament made him a very good suspect, if he had an alibi for the time of the attack on Harrison that would let him out all the way. Shayne couldn't visualize the man as having an accomplice. McCulloch struck the redhead as being strictly a lone wolf.

Shayne's thoughts were running along those lines as he drove back into Miami. He went straight to

his office. Lucy was at her desk, as usual, when he walked in. He said, "Hello, Angel. Been busy this morning?"

"There were a few calls." He thought he detected a hint of reprimand in her voice. He should have let her know where he was going to be.

"That Rawlings woman called," Lucy continued. "Did you take her case, Michael?"

Shayne leaned a hip on the corner of her desk. "Actually, it's her boss I'm working for. He's Duncan Harrison, the newspaper publisher. Somebody's trying to kill him."

"Then it's serious?"

"Yeah. Whoever it is shot at me twice yesterday."

"*Michael!*"

"Now, don't get in an uproar, Angel. They missed both times."

"That's not *funny!*"

Shayne sighed. "No, it's not. This is one of those screwy cases where there doesn't seem to be any hard physical evidence. All I've got to work with are the emotions of the people involved. A lot of hate and greed and jealousy and anger. I just have to keep pushing and poking until something breaks. Not funny at all."

He gave her Harrison's retainer check and said, "You can put this in the bank and I'll hold down the office for a while. I've got some calls to make."

When Lucy was gone, Shayne went into the inner office. He sat down at the desk and pulled the phone to him. Lighting a cigaret, he opened his notebook and found the names of the two city councilmen Demery claimed he was dining with at the time of the attack on Harrison.

"My name's Mike Shayne." Recognition flared in Garrity's eyes. "I'm working on a case, and I'd like to ask you a question."

"Sure. I'd be glad to help, Mr. Shayne."

It took quite a bit of calling around, but he finally located and talked to both men. They backed up Demery's story completely.

Shayne leaned back and puffed thoughtfully on his cigaret. Unconsciously, his fingers strayed to his left earlobe and worried it.

Demery and McCulloch had both admitted freely that they hated Harrison and wouldn't mind seeing him dead. But they both denied making the attacks, both had alibis. Of course, Shayne couldn't discount the possibility that Demery had hired an assassin. That would take a lot more checking. Shayne would have to put out feelers with all of his underworld contacts.

Gerald Benton, on the other hand, who seemed to be the least inclined to violence among the three, had no alibi at all.

Then there was Janice Harrison. The situation Cynthia Rawlings had described to him sounded like a classic case of a young fortune hunter marrying an older man

with money. But Duncan Harrison was still relatively young. Janice might not want to wait for him to die, might not want to chance the marriage breaking up.

Shayne butted out his cigaret in the ashtray and frowned. For that matter, there was Cynthia Rawlings herself to consider. She had more than hinted at a romantic involvement with Harrison which had ended abruptly with her boss married to Janice.

That might be a motive, all right, but opportunity was something else again. Shayne had left her at Xanadu the afternoon before, and she could not have gotten ahead of him on the road. Furthermore, she had been with him at the time of the later attack. It was her own apartment that had been shot up.

There were just too many suspects. The detective shook his head and reached for the phone again. He dialed the number of the Miami *News* and got lucky, catching Tim Rourke at his desk in the City Room.

"Check out something for me, will you, Tim?" he said. "Dig back in the society pages and find out what you can about Duncan Harrison's wedding, okay?"

"Sure, Mike. You still looking for whoever's trying to plug him?"

"And *me* — don't forget that. They tried again last night."

"You're *kidding!* I assume they missed, or I would have heard about it."

"Yeah, they missed, but it wasn't from lack of trying."

"How does Harrison's wedding fit in?"

"I'm trying to find out some background on Mrs. Harrison."

"Oh, yeah, the wife is always a number-one suspect, isn't she?"

"She is this time."

"You want me to call you when I get something?"

"I'm not sure where I'll be. I'll check in with you in a little while."

"Okay."

Shayne said good-bye and hung up. He supposed the next thing in line was a drive to Xanadu. He wanted to let Harrison know what he had found out so far and also check to see if the publisher was following his advice and staying indoors.

Lucy came back shortly and Shayne told her where he was headed. He drove back to his hotel to see if his car was ready to go yet, and a smiling attendant handed him the keys and a bill from the auto glass company.

It felt good to be driving his Buick again after the rented Corvair. He left the smaller car parked on the street, deciding to return it later.

Before heading the Buick toward Xanadu, he stopped at a drive-in and grabbed a couple of hamburgers to blunt his appetite.

Then he turned south and headed for Duncan Harrison's modern-day version of Kublai Khan's

stately pleasure dome.

VIII

XANADU LOOKED as it had the day before. Shayne hadn't expected any changes — but hadn't expected to be shot at, either.

There were a button and a microphone on one of the gateway pillars. He had to press one and speak into the other before the gates opened. He parked the car and went to the front door. It opened before he got there, and a short thin man in a black suit stood waiting for him.

"Mr. Shayne?" the man said.

"Yeah. You must be the butler."

"I'm Raymond. Mr. Harrison will see you immediately."

"Where is he?"

"Mr. Harrison is out by the pool, sir."

Shayne cursed inwardly. That patio was as good as a shooting gallery. He had been saddled before with clients who seemed determined to make his job harder.

Raymond led the big detective through the echoing halls toward the rear of the house. As they passed one partially opened door, Shayne heard a voice within and paused half a step to hear what it was saying.

"No, Jack, it's too soon." Janice Harrison sounded agitated. "You can't, it's dangerous! Oh. . ." Shayne heard a phone being hung up.

That was interesting. The redhead's forehead furrowed in thought as he followed Raymond. A lot of women who married for money had impatient boyfriends on the side. This could make whatever Tim Rourke found out about Janice that much more important.

Shayne and Raymond emerged into the sunlight. Duncan Harrison was reclining on one of the lounges, talking to a young man in a business suit who was nervously perching on the edge of another lounge. The man was blond and wore glasses, and there was a thick attache case at his feet.

Harrison said heartily, "Hello, Shayne! Any luck?"

"I've talked to the three men you told me about, plus some others," Shayne replied. "I thought I asked you to stay in the house."

Harrison gestured with a lighted cigar. "Who can stay inside on a beautiful day like this? I'd rather conduct my business in the sun any time. By the way, Shayne, this is Roy Ash, my accountant."

Shayne shook the man's hand briefly. Ash said, "I've heard about you, Shayne. I'm certain it's only a matter of time until you find out who's trying to kill Mr. Harrison."

"I hope so," Shayne grunted. "Whoever it is took some shots at me yesterday, too."

"*What?*" Harrison snapped.

"Yeah, twice. Didn't Miss Rawlings tell you?"

"Cynthia hasn't arrived yet this

morning. She should have been here an hour ago."

Shayne felt a sudden pang of worry. Perhaps he should have stuck closer to her. But there had been no reason to — the gunman was after Harrison, not Cynthia. He said, "I'll try to locate her."

Harrison stood up. "that's a good idea, Shayne. Ash, will those reports be ready by this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir, they should be, Mr. Harrison. There are some other matters I want to discuss with you, too." The accountant stood up, fastening his attache case.

Harrison walked past him, saying, "Come on, Shayne, let's go inside and you can tell me what you've found out."

The flat crack of a gunshot and a gurgling scream stopped them in their tracks. . .

Except for Ash, who clutched at a throat suddenly spouting crimson and fell to the patio.

Harrison stood there, frozen and aghast, until Shayne put a hand in his back and shoved. With a yell and flailing arms, the publishing magnate hit the water in the pool and went under.

Mike Shayne whirled, slipping the Colt out of its holster. There was nothing on the patio big enough to provide cover. He saw Janice and Raymond come running from the house and shouted, "*Get back! Stay inside!*"

Another slug *spanged* off the tile, and they went into reverse, ducking back into the house.

There was no place for Shayne to go except into the pool. He sliced into it in a dive made awkward by his clothes. A third bullet hummed through the air and smashed a window in the house.

Harrison was thrashing around in the water. Shayne grabbed him, making him be still and lie low. Several minutes passed while they trod water.

When no more shots had sounded for five minutes, the detective said, "You stay here. I'll see if I can flush anybody out."

He clambered out of the pool and looked toward the hill at the rear of the estate. There was no movement that he could see.

Roy Ash was lying very still in a pool of blood. Shayne could tell by looking that it was too late to do anything for him.

Shayne called out to the house. "*Raymond!*" When the butler cautiously raised his head in a window, the redhead continued, "Call the cops — if you haven't already done it."

Raymond quavered, "Y-yes, sir," then ducked back down out of sight.

Harrison yelled from the pool, "Do you see anything, Shayne?"

"Not yet," the redhead replied. He began to march doggedly toward the low brush hill, pistol gripped tightly in his hand. His skin crawled with every step he took, but he was tired of being

shot at. Not only that, but a man had just been murdered right under his nose.

Mike Shayne was too angry to stop now.

No more shots came.

A quick check of the hillside turned up nothing. He didn't have the time or the inclination to go over every inch of the ground. The police could do that far better than he.

As he was striding back toward the mansion, several sheriff's cars, sirens howling and lights flashing, turned in at the front gate. Shayne holstered his gun and shook the water out of his ears.

Harrison had got out of the pool and gone inside. Roy Ash's body was still sprawled grotesquely on the patio. Shayne looked at it and felt anger burning inside him with a cold fire.

He went into the house and found Harrison in a room dominated by a huge fireplace on one wall. The publisher was drying off with a big towel and talking to two sheriff's deputies. They all turned to him when he came into the room.

"Nothing," he announced. "Nobody took any more shots, and I didn't find anything, either."

Harrison was pale and less self-assured than Shayne had seen him. He said, "My God, Shayne, did you see Ash? That was meant for *me!* That could have been *me* lying out there."

"Yeah, it *could* have. Maybe you'll stay inside from now on."

One of the officers said, "You're Mike Shayne, aren't you?"

Shayne nodded. The other said, "Please hang around for a while, Mr. Shayne. We'll need to ask you some questions."

"You mind if I dry off a little bit? I'm dripping on this expensive floor."

The officers smiled slightly, and one of them said, "Go right ahead."

Raymond brought the redhead a towel, and the two deputies went out to join the other officers who were gathering on the patio. A car carrying a lab crew arrived, and it wasn't long before the area around the swimming pool was crowded.

Harrison said, "I'll have Raymond bring you some dry clothes. You look pretty damp."

"Thanks." Shayne nodded.

The detective went into a small anteroom and changed into the clothes Harrison provided. They were a close enough fit.

He was on his way back outside when he passed the open door of Harrison's library. Janice was sitting inside, looking out the bay window. On impulse, Shayne stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. Janice whirled around at the noise.

"Your husband's a lucky man," Shayne said.

"Yes. I'm glad he's all right."

Her face was white and drawn.

"You look pretty shaken up, Mrs. Harrison."

"Well, isn't that natural?"

"*You* tell *me*. I don't really know anything about your relationship with your husband. Who's Jack?"

She stiffened. "Jack? I don't know who you're talking about."

"I overheard your conversation on the phone earlier. You sounded as if you were afraid to do something wrong. You can tell me about it now, or I can call one of the deputies in here."

She stood up and faced him, an intense look on her face. She whispered, "Don't do that."

"Then tell me."

She turned away and closed her eyes. "Jack is my ex-husband. I had just divorced him when I met Duncan. Duncan doesn't even know that I was married before."

"Let's have the rest of it."

"I married Duncan for his money. I admit that. But I can't stand the marriage anymore! It's not worth it, no matter how rich he is. I'm just one of his interesting acquisitions, like those animals out there." She paused.

"Jack and I are going to get back together again. Jack wanted to come out today and tell Duncan the whole story. I told him to wait; I didn't want to do anything until this other business is over."

"Maybe Jack's part of it. Maybe he wants you back — *plus* Harrison's money."

"*No!* He wouldn't do anything like that!"

Shayne raked a thumbnail along his jaw. "He had better be able to prove where he was this afternoon. Give me his full name and address."

"No. I don't think I should."

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Look, kid, if you're playing straight with me, I can probably help the boy. Wouldn't it ease your mind to have him positively in the clear?"

"Well . . ." She paused for a long moment. "His name is Jack Larsen. He lives on the Beach." She gave Shayne the address, and he committed it to memory.

"I'll have to give this to the police," he said. "But I'll try to keep it as quiet as I can. There's no reason why your husband has to know about it yet."

"Thank you."

He nodded, patted her on the shoulder, then realized that he believed her, even though he had no concrete reason for doing so.

IX

WHEN SHAYNE EMERGED onto the patio, he recognized a tall bulky figure in the crowd — a man who wore a rumpled suit and was chewing on an unlit cigar. Shayne strode over to him and said, "What are you doing here, Will? This is out of your jurisdiction."

Will Gentry, Miami Chief of Police, shifted the cigar in his mouth

and said, "The sheriff called me when he got the report that you were mixed up in this, Mike. Asked me as a favor to come down and keep you in line."

"Now, Will, have you ever known me to be any other way?"

Gentry snorted.

Shayne caught a glimpse of the chalked outline where Ash's body had lain. He continued, "Let's go inside where we can hear ourselves think and I'll fill you in on what I know."

As they walked back into the house, Gentry said, "This is the craziest place. Did you know this guy Harrison has a damn zoo in his front yard?"

"Yeah. He can afford it, though."

They found a room with some comfortable chairs and sat down to smoke and talk. Shayne began with the moment Cynthia Rawlings walked into his office the day before. He went over the details of all the shootings, letting Gentry know that he had been less than completely frank with the two Miami police officers the night before in Cynthia Rawlings' apartment.

After explaining about the suspects he had questioned, he added, "There could be a bunch of other people who have a grudge against Harrison that we don't know anything about. The guy's no sweetheart. Tim Rourke says most people in the newspaper business can't stand him."

Gentry scowled. "This one's going to be a bitch, Mike. All we can do is question the suspects we know about and hope we get a break. How do you feel about them?"

"I think the best bet is either Ross Demery or Fred McCulloch. I was leaning toward the theory that Denery hired a hit man, but whoever it is has had two good shots at Harrison and missed both times. That doesn't sound like a pro."

He blew smoke toward the ceiling and continued, "McCulloch seems to be the most likely. That neighbor of his could be lying. He claims to be a good shot, but most people over-estimate their own accuracy. He hates Harrison enough, that's for sure."

"What about Benton?" Gentry asked.

"No alibi, but I wouldn't bet on him, Will. He's got a motive, but I think he's too far into the bottle to do anything about it.

"As. far as Janice Harrison goes, I just don't know. This ex-husband of hers could be a possibility."

"We'll pick him up and find out," Gentry said. He put his hands on his heavy thighs and stood up. "It's a dirty deal, Shayne. An innocent young guy like Ash takes a bullet that wasn't even meant for him."

"Yeah, it's a shame."

"Stick around a while — okay? — in case the sheriff's boys want to ask you anything."

"Sure, Will."

Shayne stood in front of a window for a time, smoking and staring out at the green lawn. He was deep in thought. Something Will Gentry said had caused a nebulous idea to form in his head, but it was flitting around like a butterfly and he couldn't quite catch it. He had a definite feeling that he had overlooked something.

Finally, he shrugged and gave it up for the moment. He put his cigaret out and went in search of a telephone. He still wanted to contact Cynthia Rawlings, now more than ever since there had been another attack.

He found a phone on a table in the hall. After dialing the number of Cynthia's apartment, he listened to it ring twenty-seven times before he hung up. Maybe she was on her way to Xanadu right now, but Shayne felt uneasy about her safety.

A few minutes later, Will Gentry reappeared and summoned the redhead to a conference with the deputy in charge of the investigation. Shayne nodded cordially to the man when Gentry introduced them.

"We've decided to bring Benton, Demery, and McCulloch into my office for questioning, Mike," Gentry said, "You can sit in if you like."

"Thanks, I will," Shayne replied. To the deputy, he said, "Are you going to leave some men here?"

"For a while. We're undermanned, though, Shayne. I'll probably have to pull them out of here sometime tonight."

Gentry asked, "You want a ride back into town, Mike?"

"No thanks, Will. I've got my car here. I'll meet you in your office. Thirty minutes all right?"

"Sure."

Shayne found Raymond and told him to let Harrison know he was on his way back to Miami. "And make sure he stays in the house!" he added.

He maneuvered his Buick around the various police vehicles still parked in the driveway and pulled out onto the highway. He used the radio-telephone beneath the dash to contact Tim Rourke at the *News*.

When Rourke came on the line, Shayne asked, "Did you find out anything about Janice Harrison, Tim?"

"Some, but not a lot, Mike. She was married and divorced once before she married Harrison. Guy's name was Jack Larsen. She comes from Tampa, strictly lower-middle class background. No criminal record, never even been picked up. If you're working on a possible golddigger angle, there's nothing to indicate she is, but there's nothing to indicate she isn't, either."

"She was almost a widow a little earlier this afternoon."

"*What?*"

"Somebody took a shot at Harrison again."

"Feed me all of it, Mike."

Shayne could tell from the reporter's voice that he was ready to scribble down notes.

"I was there when it happened. Somebody took three shots with what sounded like a rifle. The first one hit a guy named Roy Ash, Harrison's accountant, who happened to be there. He was dead on the scene."

"Anybody else hurt?"

"No, the other two shots missed. Will Gentry's coordinating the investigation, with the sheriff officially in charge."

"Okay, Mike. Do you know anything the cops don't?"

"Not a damn thing, Tim. I'm on my way to Gentry's office now to sit in while he questions some people."

"Names?"

"None you can use yet."

Shayne promised to keep Rourke informed and broke the connection. He was on the outskirts of Miami.

The detective drove directly to police headquarters and went up to Will Gentry's office. The chief was on the phone when he came in. The redhead took the straight-backed chair in front of Gentry's desk and reversed it, straddling it.

"I don't care," Gentry barked into the receiver. "I want him here — *now!*"

He hung up and threw his soggy cigar butt at the waste-basket. "Demery is being difficult," he growled, "but he'll be here."

Shayne said, "Will, I wish you'd send some boys over to Cynthia Rawlings's apartment. I haven't been able to get in touch with her today."

"Sure." Gentry picked up the phone and gave the orders. When he hung up, he said to the redhead, "Well, Benton's out of it, Mike. He was picked up last night on Vagrancy and Public Drunkenness charges. He's been in the tank since then."

"That narrows the field anyway," Shayne grunted. "Any word on McCulloch?"

"The men I sent out to bring him in haven't reported back yet. Demery should be here soon, though. We found him at his office, and it's only three blocks away."

Shayne shook his head and tugged at his left ear. "Something's wrong with this case, Will. I feel there's one angle I've completely overlooked, but I can't put my finger on what it is."

"I know the feeling."

The two old friends sat quietly for a few moments, each trying to think through every aspect of the case. Their reverie was interrupted by the sound of loud, angry voices in the hall.

"Sounds as if Demery's here," Shayne said.

The door to Gentry's office opened and Demery stalked in, followed by a white-haired man in an expensive suit, a uniformed officer and Homicide Captain Len Sturgis.

Sturgis said, "Sorry it took us so long, Chief. Mr. Demery wouldn't come without his lawyer."

Demery spotted the redhead and said, "*Shayne!* I should have known you'd be here. If Harrison's trying to railroad me again like he did before — "

The white-haired man said quickly, "My client is naturally upset, Chief Gentry. I'm Franklin Parrish, and I'd like very much to know what this is all about."

Shayne had heard of Parrish. The words he had heard most often about him were *slick*, *crafty*, *unethical*. He was the type the redhead loved to bring down a notch.

"What it's about is murder," he said bluntly. "What's your client got to say to that?"

While Demery and Parrish looked flabbergasted, Gentry snapped, "I'll ask the questions here, Mike!"

Shayne shrugged. "Sorry, Will."

"Now," Gentry said, "what about it, Demery? Where were you this afternoon?"

"Is my client being charged with anything?" Parrish asked.

"Not yet."

"Then I advise him not to answer any questions."

Gentry's face went even redder than usual. "Dammit, we're just trying to find out a few things here. A man was killed today!"

Demery was shocked. "Harrison's dead? Nobody told me. . "

"Not Harrison," Shayne cut in, unable to restrain himself. "A young fellow named Roy Ash, Harrison's accountant, got in the way of a bullet for his boss. Now why don't you tell us where you've been all day, Demery?"

Parrish said, "I told you, my client's not going to answer any —"

"Hold it, Franklin," Demery interrupted. Some of his arrogance seemed to have left him since hearing the news of Ash's death. "If there's been a murder, maybe I'd better tell them what they want to know. I've been in and out of the office all day, but there's been someone with me at all times. I haven't been near Harrison's place at all."

"We'll check on that, Demery," Gentry said.

"I know you will. I want you to. I don't like being a suspect."

Gentry opened his mouth to ask more questions, but before any could come out, his telephone rang. He snatched up the receiver, said, "Gentry," listened silently. Shayne could tell from the expression of the chief's beefy face that the news was bad.

"We'll be right there," the chief said after a moment and slammed down the phone.

"What's up, Will?" Shayne asked.

"A call just came from the unit I sent to McCulloch's place. Officer needs assistance, shots fired!"

X

SHAYNE RODE in Gentry's car. They had left Demery and Parrish standing there as they raced out of the office. More patrol units were screaming along behind them as they headed for Fred McCulloch's house.

When they got there, they found an armed siege. Gentry's driver slid the car to a stop well down the block. A lieutenant hurried over from one of the cars already on the scene. Shayne could see several officers crouching behind cars, guns drawn and trained on the McCulloch house.

"He's barricaded in there with a rifle, Chief," the lieutenant informed them. "He wouldn't open the door for the first officers on the scene. When they didn't leave, he opened up on them. Creased one on the arm before they could get to cover, but that's all the damage so far. We're ready to lob in tear gas, as soon as you give the word."

Gentry nodded grimly, "Do it." He turned to Shayne and said, "Looks like this is our man, Mike."

"Maybe." The redhead didn't feel completely convinced.

The tear gas grenades were launched, breaking windows and bursting with a crumpling sound. the blinding gas billowed through the house. The atmosphere was tense as the officers waited for results.

A rifle came sailing out the door and clattered onto the sidewalk. McCulloch followed it, hands over his eyes, staggering and choking. As soon as he was clear of the gas, he was surrounded and handcuffed. The collective sigh of relief was almost audible.

Thirty minutes later, McCulloch had been booked on charges of assault with a Deadly Weapon, Assault on a Police Officer, and Attempted Manslaughter. He was sitting in Will Gentry's office, looking crestfallen.

"I'm in enough trouble now that a little more won't hurt," he was saying. "I don't know why I lost my head like that. Guess I was just tired of being badgered. Anyway, I started that fire at Harrison's house, but I didn't poison or shoot any animals, and I never took a shot at Harrison or this Shayne fellow."

"If you did, it won't do you any good to hold out," Gentry said. Shayne looked on from a corner.

McCulloch shook his head doggedly. "Didn't do it, I tell you. I'm a better shot than that. What was that fellow's name again, the one that got killed?"

"Roy Ash. He was Harrison's accountant."

"Kept track of the thievery, huh? Well, if I *had* shot Roy Ash, it would have been for only one reason. It would have been because I *intended* to shoot him!"

Gentry sighed and nodded to a

uniformed officer that it was all right to take McCulloch away. When they had gone, he turned to Shayne and said, "This guy may be a tough nut to crack, Mike."

The redheaded detective didn't seem to hear. There was an abstracted expression on his face. Gentry said, "Mike? Something wrong?"

Shayne snapped out of it. He said, "No, it's okay, Will. Just thinking. Did you ever locate Cynthia Rawlings?"

"Not yet. You think she could be in some sort of trouble?"

"I don't know. I think I'll snoop around some myself, maybe go back out to Xanadu."

"The sheriff pulled his men out of there when he heard that McCulloch had been captured."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," the redhead said. Gentry shrugged.

Shayne left the building hurriedly and drove straight to his office through the heavy late-afternoon traffic. After giving Lucy a condensed version of the day's events, he picked up the phone and called Xanadu.

Raymond answered and called Harrison to the phone at Shayne's request. When he heard the publisher's gruff voice, Shayne said, "Harrison, I need to know if Roy Ash kept an office here in town."

"What's this about, Shayne? Fred McCulloch is in police custody. I assumed the case ended with his arrest."

"Not quite. There's still a couple of loose ends I want to tie up."

"What kind of loose ends?"

"I'd rather not say until I'm sure. Now, what about Ash's office?"

"He had an office in a building downtown. Just a minute, I'll see if I can remember where it was."

The redhead copied down the address of the office when Harrison recalled it, then said, "Did Miss Rawlings ever show up?"

"No, and I'm worried about her, Shayne. Do you think McCulloch could have done something to her?"

"I don't know," Shayne said, "but I'm going to find out." He hung up.

He sat back in his chair and paused to think things out once again, taking into account what McCulloch had said in Will Gentry's office.

McCulloch had declared that the only way he would have shot Roy Ash would have been if he had meant to. Suppose McCulloch was telling the truth when he claimed innocence. And suppose the killer *hadn't* missed, that Roy Ash was the intended target.

They had assumed earlier that Ash's death was an accident, that the bullet had been meant for Harrison. That assumption was what had been bothering Shayne. The shot that killed Ash was a clean hit, while the other two shots had missed bady.

There was no reason why the earlier attacks on Harrison couldn't have been deliberate misses, part of a plan to kill Ash. the motive might be completely unrelated to Harrison, but if the police were convinced otherwise, the real motive and the real killer might never surface.

Mike Shayne knew he would have to check it out for his own peace of mind. The place to begin was Roy Ash's office.

"I'm taking off, Angel," he said to Lucy as he went through the outer office. "I've got to check some things out now, but how about dinner tonight?"

"All right, Michael. I'd like that."

"I'll call you."

The building where Ash's office was located wasn't too far away. Shayne drove over, parked the car, went into the lobby. There were a number of executives and secretaries going the other way, since it was just past five o'clock.

The building directory told him Ash's office was on the fifth floor. He rode up in a self-service elevator. The carpeted hallway he emerged into was typical, with frosted glass doors lining it.

The door to Ash's office had his name on it. It was locked. Shayne looked up and down the hall and saw no one, although he could hear a typewriter chattering somewhere on the floor. He slid a hand into his pocket, reaching for his collection of keys. What his fingers encountered instead was the ring of keys that Cynthia had dropped in his rented car the night before. He had almost forgotten he had them. He weighed them in his hand and frowned. It was possible. . .

The third one he tried slid into the lock and turned it easily.

Once he was inside, Shayne closed the door behind him and looked around the office. He left the lights off, since there was still enough light coming in through the window.

A desk stood in the center of the small room. with a window behind it and filing cabinets on both side walls. The detective decided to try the desk first.

The side drawers contained nothing but the paraphernalia of the accounting profession. The shallow center drawer was more interesting, though, since it was locked. Shayne tried all of Cynthia's keys, but none of them worked.

It was only a matter of minutes before he had forced the simple lock. He opened the drawer slowly, not sure of what he would find.

There was a single ledger book inside. Duncan Harrison's name was written on the cover.

Shayne picked it up carefully and carried it over to the window. Opening it, he scanned the entries. As he turned the pages of the ledger, his forehead furrowed into a frown and trenches ap-

peared in his lean cheeks. His mouth was set in a tight, grim line. This was not what he had expected.

The office door opened behind him. Shayne started to turn. He dropped the book and reached hurriedly for his gun.

He didn't make it. There was the *splat* of a silenced pistol, and something slammed into his side. He fell back against the wall, grabbing at a filing cabinet for support. His fingers didn't seem to work right, though. The floor rose up to meet him as he fell.

For a while, all Mike Shayne saw was darkness.

XI

WHEN HE WOKE up, the sun was gone and the office was in semi-darkness. He was lying on his back next to the desk. There was a throbbing pain in his left side. He put a hand inside his coat and brought it out sticky. The bleeding seemed to have stopped for the moment.

He got up slowly and carefully. He didn't like turning the lights on, but he had to see how much damage had been done. When he flipped the switch, he pulled his coat and shirt up for a look.

There was a lot of dried blood, but it appeared that the bullet had gone through his side cleanly, missing both bones and organs. The chief danger would be of infection.

There wasn't time to worry about doctors or hospitals now. . .

The ledger was gone, of course, as were the keys and his gun. He knew there was no time to lose. Over an hour had passed while he lay unconscious, according to his watch. Duncan Harrison was in deadly danger. Shayne had to get to Xanadu.

He bent over gingerly, picking up his hat and jamming it on his head. A twinge of pain rippled through him.

He found stairs at the end of the hall and went down them rather than taking the elevator. Blood had leaked through to stain his coat, and he didn't want to run into anyone. The stairs led him to a service entrance that opened into an alley. He hurried back to his car as rapidly as his condition permitted.

A quick stop at his apartment was in order. He went through the service entrance there, too, stripped off his coat and shirt, pulling the shirt away from the wound carefully. It was an ugly-looking mark, but he had had enough experience with gunshot wounds to know that it wasn't serious, just painful.

He washed the wound and bandaged it, then put on a fresh shirt and went back down to his Buick. He couldn't afford any more delay. He might already be too late to save Harrison.

Driving with efficient speed,

Shayne rapidly left Miami behind and headed toward Xanadu. The speedometer needle crept up to touch 90 miles per hour. Shayne kept the pressure on the accelerator, overtaking and passing other cars easily.

He slowed down before he got to the gate, cutting his lights and motor and rolling to a stop beside the fence. He took his spare pistol from the glove compartment and got out of the car, tucking the Remington .38 into his belt.

Shayne didn't relish the thought of scaling the fence, but there was no other way. If the killer hadn't got to Harrison yet, the redhead could not risk announcing his arrival over the speaker system.

He approached the fence, removing his belt. He swung the metal buckle against the links. No sparks; that was good. If the fence had been electrified, he would have been in real trouble.

Shayne grabbed the fence with both hands, got a toehold, started up.

The climb was bad. Weak from loss of blood, the redhead had to stop every few minutes to catch his breath. An occasional dizzy spell hit him, causing him to hang motionless for long seconds until the world righted itself.

Finally, he made it to the top. The climb down the other side wasn't nearly as rough. But, he was glad to feel solid ground under his feet again.

There were numerous lights on in the mansion, but nothing out of the ordinary appeared to be going on. The animals were making a racket, with the growling roars of the lions predominant.

Shayne cut across the lawn to the driveway and went down it at a fast walk. As he passed between the hedges, he heard the monkeys chattering on the other side.

He circled around one side of the big house. He could see no one moving around inside through the lighted windows he passed.

When he reached the back of the mansion, he stopped. Listening intently, he peered into the shadows, trying to pierce every dark corner. Something caught his eye by one of the lounges, but the lights surrounding the swimming pool were turned off and all he could make out was a vague shape.

Mike Shayne slipped the gun from his belt and moved forward. When he got closer, he recognized the shape. It was that of a woman's body, sprawled on the tile patio.

He knelt beside her. There was a small hole in her dress, just below the left breast. It hadn't bled much.

Janice Harrison would not have to decide between love and money now. She was beyond worry or decision about anything.

That left only Harrison, and he might be dead by now, too. The detective left Janice's body where

it was and walked back toward the front of the house. The time for stealth was over.

He came around a corner of the house and stopped in his tracks. The second floor terrace overlooking the menagerie was directly above him. He heard Harrison's voice plainly.

Shayne could not hear Raymond's answer, because a monkey on the other side of the hedge set up a sudden clamor. Something had disturbed it.

There was a small opening in the hedge. The redhead slid swiftly for it, the .38 gripped tightly in his big fist. He moved through the gap in the hedge and whirled to his left, lining his gun barrel on a dim figure who was crouching and looking up at the terrace.

"*Hold* it, Cynthia!" Shayne called softly.

Cynthia Rawlings turned toward him slowly. Light from a three-quarter moon shone on her blonde hair and on the gun in her hand.

In a quiet voice that Shayne could barely hear above the animal noise, she said, "I'm sorry I had to shoot you, Mike, but I had to have that ledger. I'm glad I didn't kill you."

"Why don't you drop the gun, Cynthia? It's all over now."

Her voice rose, became more vicious. "It won't be over until Duncan's dead! He *deserves* to die for what he did!"

"You mean marrying someone else? *That* was his crime?"

"It was a crime after all we had meant to each other! You don't understand, Mike. I loved him — he was my whole life. Then he got tired of me.

"He married Janice, and then he didn't even have the decency to fire me! No, he kept me here so that I would have to see her smirking face every day. Don't you think that's a crime?"

"You *could* have quit your job."

"I thought about it. But then I decided to make them pay, both of them. I was in a perfect position to do it, too."

Shayne's side was beginning to bother him. It felt as if the wound had begun to bleed again. The night wasn't hot, but sweat dripped down his face as he said, "So you made a play for Roy Ash and brought him in on your plan."

"That wasn't hard. He was more than willing to help me divert funds. Embezzlement didn't bother him, especially after I told him I loved him."

It was a stand-off. Cynthia's gun was pointed at him, and he had no doubt that she would fire without hesitation. All he could do was keep her talking, but that was a dead end, too, because he was growing weaker by the minute.

"When McCulloch set his fire, that gave you another opening, didn't it?" Shayne said. "You could take your revenge slowly, knowing that someone else might get the blame. You began your war of nerves by killing those poor

animals and getting Ash to take a shot at Harrison, deliberately missing.

"When it came time for the actual killing, though, he balked. he tried to back out and threatened to tell Harrison. So you had to get rid of him first, before you killed Janice and Harrison."

Some of it was guesswork, but she didn't deny any of it. "I just did what I had to do," she said. "I'm sorry about Roy, but he would have ruined everything."

Shayne took a step forward. Cynthia's gun arm stiffened. The redhead said, "Why don't you just give up, Cynthia? Things are bad enough now. Killing Harrison will only make them worse."

She shook her head. "I've gone too far. I've got to finish it now. This has been a rough day, Mike. I knew Roy had implicated me in that ledger, but I couldn't get into his office because I lost my keys. I was going to break in when everyone had gone home. I was very surprised when I saw you going into the office. I was watching from a closet down the hall."

Shayne's head was swimming now in the grip of a fever. Cynthia continued, "That ledger is gone now, Mike. You can't prove anything. But you won't have to. Janice is dead now, and if you let me finish what I've started, I'll turn myself in to the police. I promise."

The gun was getting too heavy for Shayne to hold. He licked dry lips and tried to speak again, but before he could, a new voice cracked from overhead.

"My *God!*" Duncan Harrison cried. He was standing on the terrace, looking unbelievingly down at them. "I heard everything, Cynthia. I heard it *all! Janice!*"

With a cry as animal-like as those around her, Cynthia turned and fired upwards. Shayne saw Harrison stagger backward out of sight as he squeezed off a shot that went wild. He threw himself at Cynthia.

Both of them went to the ground as he crashed into her. He tried to hold her down, and weak as he was from the wound and its resulting fever, he was more than strong enough.

But then the hand holding the gun came around and smashed the barrel against the side of his head. Shayne saw the blow coming and managed to duck away so that he didn't take the full force of it. Stars danced before his eyes, though, and Cynthia slipped from his grasp.

She was instantly up and running deeper into the menagerie. Shayne staggered to his feet and took off after her.

The gunshots had stirred the animals into a frenzy. Their noise turned the night to bedlam. Shayne could see Cynthia running ahead of him, then pausing at a cage. He didn't know what she was doing until the door sprang open and the cage's occupant, a

gazelle, was loose and running wildly in fright.

Cynthia was at another cage now, then another. Shayne suddenly found his path blocked by the monkeys and zebras and other animals that were unidentifiable in the darkness, all maddened by fear and confusion.

Cynthia turned and fired back through them at Shayne. The redhead heard an animal scream in pain. He wasn't going to return the fire, since that would only spook the animals more.

He leaned on the bars of an empty cage to catch his breath. It seemed to be the safest place. The stampeding animals were avoiding their former prisons.

The angry roar of a lion suddenly overpowered all the other noises. It sent a pang of apprehension through Shayne. Surely Cynthia wouldn't be foolish enough to let one loose? In its crazed state, it would attack anything that moved.

"*Cynthia!*" Shayne shouted into the din. "Come *back!* It's *over!* No one's going to *hurt you!*"

The volume of the lion's roar increased, and a piercing scream cut through the night. Shayne cried, "*Damn it!*" He staggered toward the sounds, dodging apes as he went. The pain in his side had become a constant fire.

The light from the moon was enough to show him the vague, rolling shapes on the ground. The growling and the screaming were intermingled in a ghastly symphony. There wasn't enough light for a good shot, but Shayne didn't suppose that would matter too much now. He raised his gun and fired.

There was another scream, but the roaring halted abruptly.

Mike Shayne felt himself going out. All of the night's happenings on top of his wound were too much. The world swam dizzily, and then he was falling. He lay gratefully on the grass and closed his eyes to rest. The cries of the animals seemed to fade away.

The last things he heard before descending into blackness were the whimper of a human voice and the wail of a siren.

XII

"WHEN I ASKED you out to dinner, Angel, this isn't quite what I had in mind," Mike Shayne said several hours later.

He was propped up in a hospital bed, his side heavily bandaged. He had been given a blood transfusion and felt quite a bit better. The tray of hospital food he had been given was bland, but it was better than nothing.

Lucy Hamilton and Tim Rourke were standing beside the bed. Lucy's face was anxious. She said, "I wish you'd quit getting shot, Michael."

Shayne grinned. "So do I. Did you find out how Cynthia and Harrison were doing, Tim?"

"Harrison will be fine," the lanky reporter replied. "He just got pinked in the shoulder. He's pretty broken up about his wife, though. As for Cynthia — well, they don't know yet. It's still touch and go. If she does pull through, you won't be able to recognize her after what the lion did to her. That was one hell of a lucky shot you made, Mike."

Shayne snorted and said, "You're right about it being lucky. The shape I was in, I don't think I had a thing to do with it."

Lucy took his rough left hand and held it in both of hers. Rourke took out his notebook and said, "So Cynthia Rawlings was behind all of it except the fire?"

"Yeah." Shayne nodded. "McCulloch set that on his own, but it played right into Cynthia's hands. She wanted him scared. She didn't want me poking into things, but she had to do what Harrison told her or lose her job. She had to have the job to carry out her plan.

"So she called Ash and had him waiting to take a shot at me on the road back to Miami. He didn't mind that, but when she told him she was going to kill Janice and Harrison, he got cold feet."

"Was he the one who shot up Cynthia's apartment?"

"It had to be him. Cynthia was furious after the shooting was over, but she wasn't mad because somebody shot at me, she was mad because he missed."

Rourke was scribbling away. Shayne continued, "I went to Ash's office because I had an idea that he was the intended victim, not Harrison. I found that ledger, and it laid the whole thing open. It turned out I was only half right."

"That half was enough to get you nearly killed." Lucy said.

Shayne cocked a bushy eyebrow at her. "You didn't like Cynthia Rawlings right from the first, did you, Angel? Why was that?"

Lucy frowned and hesitated before she answered. "I don't know, Michael. Sometimes when you meet a person, you tune in right on them and can see right to the heart of them. It's just a feeling. Cynthia struck me as very possessive, and I knew she could be jealous and vengeful. Those are qualities I don't like."

"Neither do I, Angel. Neither do I."

Rourke looked up from his notes and said, "I'd better go get this written up, Mike. I'll come back and see you in the morning."

"Bring me some cigarets, will you?"

"Sure thing. Take it easy, Mike."

But Shayne had already leaned his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Lucy stroked soft fingers across his forehead.

Rourke shook his head and went out, mentally composing his lead. He was muttering something about Kublai Khan.

Shayne and Lucy didn't hear him. . .

What Really Happened in Farnsburg

by MIKE PLAKE

The Whole Town Had Apparently Gone Mad — but Behind Its Mania Lurked a Devious Purpose.

JENKINS WAS amazed.

For a full ten seconds, the patrol car rolled toward Courthouse Square, a pilotless craft.

Jenkins tried to recover. The burly deputy yanked the wheel in another direction, clipping a guy wire. Again he fought the wheel, almost missing the second cable that supported the pole — almost. But by that time the 45-caliber bullet from Wilbur Harkness' Colt Peacemaker had pierced the right fender of his cruiser, shattering the cast-iron engine block.

The power steering went out.

The power brakes went out.

Jenkins, doing what he thought A.J. would have done under the same circumstances, was unable to maneuver. The second support wire popped like a bad banjo string.

Jenkins hit the pole.

The creosoted utility pole, having stood like a sentry on the courthouse lawn since 1916, tumbled into the rose bed which, every Saturday since 1947, had been tended with patriotic care by the Farnsburg Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

A twenty-foot plastic Santa Claus was flung from the top of the pole to the roof of Jenkins' cruiser. Sprawled there, sputtering from a maze of shorted circuitry, its rib-boned arms hung down over the windows of the vehicle.

Why — Why? thought Jenkins, as he grew increasingly alarmed at the possibility of being electrocuted in his own patrol car by a plastic Santa Claus, *why was it still on the pole in the middle of summer*?

He remembered. The only time all the various business factions of Farnsburg got together was Christmas. It was busiest and most profitable. Leaving Santa Claus up there — well it served as a kind of economic flagship.

Wilbur Harkness was trying to

explain to Jenkins why he shot his mount out from under him, so to speak.

Understand, first of all, that no one, not even Machine-gun Kelly, if he were alive today, could have robbed Wilbur Harkness of Farnsburg, Texas.

Wilbur still had the first dollar he'd ever made. He packed a well-oiled, sixty-five-year-old forty-five under his coat whether he was working or going to church. He had a sharp eye. Rotund, in his early sixties, Wilbur had more cases pending with the county attorney for non-payment of debts than any other businessman in town. Last year, he received the Farnsburg Chamber of Commerce Outstanding Citizen Award.

"Any some-buck comes up here from the city and tries to rob me, I'll blow him apart," Wilbur bragged one day to the Farnsburg county sheriff. His cast-iron profile taut as always,the sheriff bobbed his head in pretended understanding. One of his eyes looked at Wilbur with successful sincerity.

The other, hidden by a black patch, whirled about in small circles like beams on a radar screen. Occasionally it would stop, zoom in and focus peripherally on the smooth, tanned thighs of Cheri Berri, the long-haired, fair-skinned waitress.

Nearly everyone thought the sheriff had only one good eye. Five years ago, a lumberjack had arrived at the mill after weeks of sawing logs deep in the woods. The price of pulpwood had dropped. When the transaction was completed, the lumberjack's profit was barely enough to fill his gas tank.

He had returned that night and commenced shooting up the mill office. Sheriff Rexall Billings had arrived at the scene just in time to take a shotgun blast through his windshield. Calmly, the sheriff had assured the woodcutter that nothing would happen if he would just lay the shotgun down and come out.

Then a billy club had appeared out of nowhere and Sheriff Billings beat the woodcutter to within the proverbial inch of his life.

The doctor picked out shards of glass from Sheriff Billings' eyelid. After he finished, he told him to wear an eye patch. From that moment on, the sheriff could walk down the street and people would whisper under their breaths:

"That there's Sheriff Rexall Billings. Lost his eye in a shootout, then he beat the man to death. He's a mean some-buck."

So, while the eye healed perfectly, Sheriff Billings retained his patch. He had developed a technique of using his peripheral vision. Not as good as eyes in the back of your head, he supposed, but nearly so.

The sheriff paid the tab for the coffee, as always. He waited at

the side door for Cheri.

An alleyway ran next to the side entrance of the drugstore. Facing it were ugly, undecorated rear ends of all the retail stores that lined Courthouse Square. From nine in the morning until six at night, the air conditioning exhaust systems provided a fifteen mile-per-hour gust across the opening to the alley. Frequently it smelled of dusty onions.

As the sheriff escorted Cheri across the alleyway, this is what happened:

The wind blew Cheri Berri's short skirt up over her waist. Homer Jenkins, the sheriff's only deputy, drove by in the county's only official patrol car and saw it. A hundred feet away, in front of the night depository window of the town's only bank, in which he owned a considerable share of stock, Wilbur Harkness was robbed.

Homer Jenkins should not have seen the effects of the wind on Cheri Berri. Ordinarily, in his everyday routine, Jenkins would not have been passing the drugstore at that time of day. But fate sometimes takes a hand.

All that morning and afternoon, behind a billboard a hundred yards away from the four-way intersection near Farnsburg High School, Deputy Homer Jenkins had been waiting for his prey. It seemed a lot longer than three hours of waiting from Jenkins' viewpoint, and in a way, it was. Actually, Jenkins had been waiting ten years — ever since he graduated — to do something horrible to Blue Hepplewhite, principal and head football coach.

Jenkins recalled that it was Blue Hepplewhite who had made him paint the men's restroom four times in battleship grey when he was caught smoking.

It was Hepplewhite who had made Jenkins memorize the Gettysburg Address, only to recite it at the top of his lungs while running windsprints in the rain after football practice in late August.

It was Hepplewhite who had constantly urged Jenkins to get tough, be tough. Then, during the most crucial series of plays in the homecoming game of his senior year, Hepplewhite replaced Jenkins with young Timothy Farnsburg. While Jenkins warmed the bench, young Timothy, who had never practiced in pads because of a trick knee, caught the pass and won the game before a thousand screaming fans.

That was how Jenkins remembered Hepplewhite. The only justification for that final insult, Jenkins thought, was that Old Man Doug Farnsburg had donated the land for the high school stadium, the seats, the concession stand, plus the $5,000 supplement to Hepplewhite's yearly salary.

Jenkins had never forgiven Hepplewhite. Today was the day of reckoning. As soon as Hepplewhite's crusty Studebaker left the

school parking lot, to drive all three blocks to his house, Jenkins would ticket him, and ticket him for every imaginable offense on the record books.

"One step out of line," wished Jenkins as he watched the old Studebaker creep out. "One step out of line. Just *one. Please!*"

But it never happened.

Hepplewhite never exceeded the speed limit, never missed a turn signal, or ran a stop sign.

The deputy pounded the dashboard in frustration. The entire afternoon had been wasted. The weeks and months, planning, dreaming, scheming — all in vain. In frustration he decided to cruise over to the Burger Palace and harrass the young people.

Driving past the drugstore was not part of Jenkins' daily routine. Neither was the sight of Cheri Berri on that particular day. As the wind whisked up her skirt, it appeared to Jenkins that she wore nothing underneath.

Actually, she was wearing flesh-colored pantyhose borrowed from Myrtle, her roommate, who was away at college. But that was not what Deputy Jenkins chose to believe. Sometimes, people believe what they want to believe. It diverted his attention from the wheel.

Jenkins was glad the windows were rolled up, protecting him from Santa Claus. However, he dared not touch the metal handles even to crack the window so that he could hear what Wilbur Harkness was trying to tell him.

He tried gestures.

Wilbur didn't understand.

"Walked up to the night depository window. Nothing strange in that, right? Do it every week about this time of day. Right? This young man, he had hippy-length hair, he was dressed in a mechanic's uniform. What? No. *U-n-i-form*. Said he was repairing the mechanism on the sliding drawer of the depository.

"Asked me if I could hold a wrench one side of the drawer while he went to get another one. Right? Nothing strange about that. No. I said *w-r-e-n-c-h*. Anyway, I wait there for just a few seconds, then I look up, and he's halfway across the square, and he's got my moneybag.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather. I pulled my pistol and fired as he was crossing the street. Which is when I shot you," Wilbur said, pointing to Jenkin's cruiser. He stuck his pistol back under his coat, sastisfied with his explanation.

Homer Jenkins could not understand what Wilbur was saying. He was trying to reach the snotty-nosed kid they used in the afternoons as a dispatcher in the courthouse. Finally, the kid quit listening to the top forty long enough to catch Jenkins' call.

"Get Big Marvin and his wrecker down here," Jenkins ordered.

Sheriff Rexall Billings and Cheri

Berri were standing on the corner, surveying the ruined roses. Or so everyone thought. With his "bad" eye, the sheriff was actually checking out Cheri's legs, remembering that moment when her skirt blew up over her waist.

YOUNG TIMOTHY Farnsburg, completely composed, waved at the 77-year-old twin brothers, Bill and Bart McClusky, as he walked through the lobby of the Hotel McClusky, where he had been residing the last six months under the alias of Benjamin Franklin.

Bill or Bart didn't know who young Timothy really was. Not that Bill or Bart would admit it. They had never even admitted the Apollo moon missions. A fair statement about Bill *and* Bart McCluskey was that they refused to believe anything the government said after Franklin Roosevelt died.

Arguing the validity of the Apollo program, Bill or Bart would ask rhetorically, "What does going to the moon have to do with the New Deal?"

When young Timothy checked in the first day, Bart or Bill tried to interest him in a war bond.

Each day after work, young Timothy would wave at them, and they would wave back, but would say nothing, as they were usually absorbed in the 6 p.m. newscast. They thought it was all done with special effects, like the "Towering Inferno" and the "Poseidon Adventure."

"I just don't see how they do that," Bart or Bill would comment in amazement as they watched a report on fire bombing in Northern Ireland.

Young Timothy picked up his mail from the fourth slot on the bottom row and walked up the creaky old staircase to his corner room on the second floor. Casually, he folded back the curtain and watched Big Marvin rescue Deputy Jenkins from the patrol car. What a stroke of luck, he thought, that people like Wilbur Harkness carried guns.

Although young Timothy had made his living outside the law for several years, he never carried a weapon. Never needed one, natural human greed being what it is. He chuckled to himself,peeled off the long wig and gave his closely-cropped hair a brush with his hand. He changed from the mechanic's one-piece uniform to his normal Levis and cowboy boots. He shuffled through the mail on the bed. He separated letters from folks like:

— Andrew Jackson of Duluth, Minnesota.

— George Washington of Glacier, Montana.

— Aaron Burr of Los Angeles, California.

And of course, one addressed to himself, Benjamin Franklin, McCluskey Hotel, Room 201, Farnsburg, Texas.

He opened Jackson of Duluth first, and mentally translated.

Dear Ben (young Timothy)

I'm sure you will be happy to know that your watermelons (stolen cars) are on the way. Ben, we sure had a good crop this year (nobody's been busted so far). Included in your shipment are a gross of our fine Rhode Island Green Melons (three 1977 Pintos, less than 20,000 miles, factory air, radio, whitewalls.) We hope your Region 5 (East Texas, Southwest Louisiana) customers (doctors, dentists) like them.

Ben, we also shipped you a couple dozen of our Blue C-2 Hybrids (Cosworth Vegas).

The remainder of the shipment is balanced with those solid, sweet Hollandaise (a mixture of standard Vegas and Pintos, sprinkled with a Volkswagen or two). — about thirteen gross (thirteen vehicles).

It is our sincere hope that you will find this shipment satisfactory. Of course, our normal fee schedule will apply, (cash, used bills, nothing larger than a twenty).

If you have problems on your end, remember Gronsky is there for emergencies.

Sincerely,

Andrew Jackson (Bennie the Mole).

Young Farnsburg put the letter aside. He clipped the lock on the zipper bag with a pair of bolt cut-

He arranged the money in stacks. The middle group of checks included people who, he knew from previous study of the fried chicken company economic profile of Farnsburg, were in the lower socio/economic scale — what one might call the working poor. He burned all of those checks.

The stack on the left belonged to those citizens who really controlled economic activity in Farnsburg — they owned three of the small-loan, high-interest concerns — the doctors, dentists and orthopedic surgeon. Oh, yes, and the orthodontist. He totaled and marked them on a bank deposit slip. He kept the $5,131.35 in cash.

He scotch-taped the top of the zipper bag and put it in a brown paper sack and placed it on the carton of letters and envelopes bearing the logo of Wilbur Harkness's Discount Center. Also in the carton was a complete list of stick-on labels of every registered voter in Farnsburg County, of which Farnsburg, naturally, was the county seat.

Then young Timothy went to sleep, recounting his entrance into the world of crime. . .

HE USED to walk out of Joe Kingsley Jewelers with diamond rings under his tongue. He made Eagle Scout at age thirteen. He had the award taken away from him a year later, when the committee learned that half of his merit badge requirements had been performed by his father's driver.

As he grew older and went away to Boston for an education, he learned to steal cars.

One night, he was filling an order from a Houston dentist. He stole the Dean of Engineering's Pinto. There was a solid, chamber-of-commerce type reason for this.

The market for previously-owned automobiles has changed in recent years. The nation is in the throes of various economic crises and petro-chemical woes. So doctors, dentists, orthodontists, while they still purchase Mercedes, Cadillacs and Electras for their main family vehicles, have taken to choosing small gas-saving urban-type vehicles, have taken to choosing small gas-saving urban-type vehicles as a second, third or fourth car.

Your plastic surgeons, gynecologists, general practioners in urban areas with a large Medicare practice remain an exception.

However, generally, as they approach their forty-first birthday, you'll see them driving the two-seater Mercedes, Jaguars, Alfas and, if they can get them imported, Ferraris.

Young Timothy had learned this during his first semester in college, when he stole a white Cadillac convertible with red leather interior, cruise control and white wheel hubcaps. Owned by the mistress of a high-ranking Republican, it was a very slow mover. Finally, in frustration, from a phone booth on Cambridge's Brattle Square, he had tried to return the vehicle.

The politician's aide had denied the existence of the car. "Don't you know we are in the middle of an economic/petro-chemical crisis? We don't use big cars like that anymore," he said officiously.

"I stole it from your boss," said young Timothy.

"It must belong to a Democrat," said the aide.

"It belongs to your boss. Says so on the registration."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. There's been some kind of mistake. The Chief is in full accord with the President's official policy of energy conservation."

"Look," said young Timothy, "I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't care. I parked the car in your boss's parking lot outside the Xenon building. The space his girlfriend uses."

"Girlfriend?'"

"The blonde. The one with the big chest."

"You've made some kind of mistake," the aide retorted nervously. "The Chief has been happily maried for twenty-seven — no, twenty-seven-and-a-half — years. He has a wife, two fine children, and a cocker spaniel named Leonard."

The aide hung up.

Young Timothy gave the keys and the car to a belly dancer he had met named Gronsky. Afterwards he stole nothing but small cars.

So the Dean of Engineering never recovered his Pinto. Young Timothy began to fill other orders regularly. By his senior year, he had never been arrested and was clearing five hundred a week on the average.

The organization he was dealing with grew from a street-corner operation to a leased parking garage near the university which offered 24-hour delivery. A board of directors was elected. Franchises were established.

A rule of thumb evolved — every town in which a Kentucky Fried Chicken store was located was a potential outlet for Associated Cars, Inc. What was good enough for the Colonel. . .

When Farnsburg, Texas finally got one, young Timothy returned home. The drop was set up for the back side of the gigantic parking lot belonging to Wilbur Harkness' Discount Center. The shipment, according to Andrew Jackson of Duluth, was on its way. Now all young Timothy needed was a diversion for Sheriff Rexall Billings and his troops on the day of delivery. Young Timothy's time was coming. He slept soundly.

IT WAS Saturday morning. The moisture in the air fogged the windshield and the Spartan heater in the 1950 Chevrolet truck with the skinny tires and battered slat slides couldn't keep up with it. Leroy H. Butterworth, the driver, kept wiping the inside of the windshield with the palm of his hand.

Riding beside him, wearing a flappy-brimmed straw hat she had bought at a Mexican import store in Lufkin five years earlier, was his wife, Melba. The Butterworths, like hundreds of other very poor East Texas truck farmers who scratched out a living from such sandy loam around Farnsburg as wasn't being used to grow pine trees, didn't get into town very often.

They were the first ones to drive into Wilber Harkness' Discount Store parking lot. It was 7:30 a.m. The store opened at ten. Leroy and Melba smiled, because they knew many more folks would be coming, and they would be first in line.

After all, it was not every day you got a personalized letter with Wilbur Harkness' logo at the top, promising a dollar in cash American money for every dollar you spent in the store. All in honor of the town's centennial.

Between Leroy and Melba, on the tattered fabric seat, was a Mason jar containing their life savings of $673. With that and the Harkness letter, they expected to buy a new garden tractor to replace their worn-out, thirty-year-old John Deere.

Deputy Homer Jenkins arrived thirty minutes before the store opening. The parking lot was full and traffic was stacked up three blocks away. Jenkins had bor-

rowed a little jeep from Mack at the Farnsburg post office because his patrol car was still under repair.

The steel door handles and the window lifts on the jeep were covered with black vinyl electrical tape. Jenkins had on a new pair of work boots with neoprene rubber soles. God only knew what or who Wilbur Harkness was going to shoot the next time, but Homer Jenkins wasn't about to take another chance on getting electrocuted because of it.

There was a big steel post in the middle of the parking lot next to the highway. It supported the store sign, which was neon and had letters twelve feet high spelling out Wilbur's name in full. It was mounted on a concrete base three feet in diameter and, in Jenkins' opinion, offered an ideal place for a lookout post. He parked next to it, climbed on top of the base and watched the pandemonium begin.

By 10 a.m. the highway was jammed with vehicles all the way to Courthouse Square. Sheriff Rexall Billings stepped between the automobiles and trucks and motor homes that had been on their way to the lake and had got marooned. Sheriff Billings saw Wilbur Harkness inside the store, waving his pistol in one hand and a scrap of paper in the other. People were lined up at the door and Wilbur was refusing them entrance.

When the Sheriff finally made his way inside, Wilbur was livid, the cords of his neck straining. He was so angry he couldn't speak — an unusual occurrence for Wilbur Harkness, observed the Sheriff.

"Read. . .read. . .read. . ." Wilbur finally gasped, handing the Sheriff a rumpled piece of stationery with the Wilbur Harkness Discount Store logo.

"Hmmm," said the Sheriff, adjusting his patch. "Wilbur, I've got to hand it to you. This looks like the best discount sale I've ever seen in a retail business."

Wilbur Harkness was trying to curse.

"A discount on top of a discount, you might say, huh Wilbur?" the Sheriff chuckled, slapping Harkness on the back.

Wilbur Harkness was not laughing.

"If I let those people in here and do what that letter says, I'll be ruined. Somebody is trying to run me out of business," he complained.

"Wilbur, my boy, if you *don't* let those people in — the sheriff pointed to a crowd of about five hundred persons who were beginning to shuffle against the glass door and front picture windows — "if you don't let those people in and do exactly what that letter says, those people are going to tear this place apart anyway.

"The way I see it, you're stuck

either way you go. I can't control that many people. The highway patrol — don't forget this is a holiday — are all out on the freeways, handing out tickets. I think maybe you ought to let them in."

Wilbur was gasping again.

"I think maybe you ought to honor the letters. Think of the promotional possibilities of this. People will be talking about Wilbur Harkness for years. Honor the letters," advised the Sheriff, who had not said so many words to Wilbur Harkness since he had known him.

It was an hour past opening time. Leroy H. Butterworth had fields to pick. He decided it was time to leave.

"That letter was a hoax," he told Melba disgustedly. He put the truck in neutral and reached his right foot across the floorboard to punch down the ancient starter mechanism.

It was like the little boy removing his finger from the dike. Once the truck was in neutral, the tension from the car behind him bumped the truck over the parking lot curb. And across the sidewalk. And through the front showroom window.

Butterworth finally got the old six-cylinder engine started and backed out of the camping equipment aisle, but not before a mob of disgruntled shoppers attacked the opening.

Two hundred yards away, to the rear of the store, on a narrow side street that had never been included for paving in Farnsburg's master plan, young Timothy was preparing to receive his first shipment.

The trucks crept up the lane slowly, each one coupled to a covered trailer. On the sides of the trailers were the name of a large food store chain. Young Timothy thought that was rather a nice touch, wondered if the Andrew Jackson — Bennie the Mole himself — had thought of that.

"Here you go, Mac," said the driver of the first truck as he stepped down with a clipboard in his hand. "Just sign right here and we'll get these things unloaded."

Young Timothy was excited. A group of obstetricians were camped at the lake, waiting for delivery. He signed the ticket and walked around the rear of the truck trailer and opened the doors.

Then he began gasping just like Wilbur Harkness.

"Water. *Water!*" he said, letting his hands fall to his sides. "These are watermelons," he said several times in a voice so weak it was hard for the trucker to hear.

"You bet," the trucker said, chomping a cheap cigar. "That's exactly what it says on this bill of lading you just signed. Watermelons. And that's exactly what you got."

"*Watermelons!*" said young Timothy tonelessly.

"You bet," said the trucker.

"What did you expect? Canapes?"

"It's just that I wasn't expecting. These. Water — "

"Look, Mac, I don't know about that. All I know is this. I was hired to bring these here, and I got the bill of lading here. Either you are going to pay me or I'm going to make you suddenly shorter. Follow my drift?"

Young Timothy gave him the money. As he counted it, they walked over to the second truck. He opened the doors.

"These are not watermelons," he said slowly, as if he were having trouble pronouncing it.

"That's correct, Mac. These are people. Mexicans. Wetbacks,to be exact. They picked the melons. They go with the crop."

"Why do they go with the crop?" Young Timothy couldn't think of anything else to ask.

"Look, Mac, all I know is they were part of the shipment and I was hired — "

The trucker was interrupted by the Mexicans, who were jumping off the truck and breaking open the watermelons and eating them. Young Timothy felt a tugging at his pants.

"*Senor, senor,*" a small boy said, "My name is Hector. What do we do now?"

GIVING BACK the deposits was not hard. The physicians were all dressed as bass fishermen, and the lake was not far from town. They had their boats and tents. They could still enjoy the weekend on the lake. They hadn't lost anything.

Young Timothy had lost. He had twenty dollars left in his pocket, fifty Mexicans and four hundred watermelons fresh off the truck. He began walking down the lane, which ran parallel to the main highway. He did not know where; he did not have a destination. All he wanted was to walk away from the scene of his failure.

Hector walked with him. A couple of blocks from Wilbur Harkness's store was a low-profile building with blue trim against white, crinkled metal that bore rusty marks of time. Hector asked what it was.

"I used to work there as a boy," said young Timothy. "It's the Wilbur Harkness Ice Company."

He explained to the boy how water was poured into the bins, which were cooled by thousands of refrigerated coils as in your home refrigerator.

"We don't have those," said the young wetback.

Suddenly, young Timothy had an idea. He could cool the watermelons inside the ice house and Hector's people could sell them to Wilbur Harkness's Centennial Sale customers. Adrenalin rushed through his veins. There was nobody at the ice house, because everybody was at the discount store. Young Timothy jimmied the door with no trouble.

That afternoon, he made $1500.

Wilbur Harkness, on the other hand, sold his store down to the bare bones and lost ten. That was the kind of profit margin he maintained.

With fifteen hundred, young Timothy walked across the highway to the Ford dealer and made a down payment on a used three-ton truck with a canvas top over the bed.

He drove the Mexicans up to the northern part of the county, where he had arranged for their employment by the county's largest wood products company. The Mexicans would work at the plant. They would rent apartments in a rent-supplement housing complex which had been built by the company with loans guaranteed by the United States government.

Young Timothy pocketed three thousand in commissions from the company personnel manager. He made a deal for a larger used tractor-trailer rig and planned to drive to Nashville and break into country music. There was no profit, he had decided, remaining in the used car business when you couldn't be sure of delivery.

And, of course, there was another important reason young Timothy felt an urge to leave Farnsburg — Sheriff Rexall Billings.

The sheriff had surprised him at the loading dock entrance of the ice house as the last melons were being taken away.

"Farnsburg," he said, adjusting his eye patch, "I know exactly what you have been doing. You wrote the letters. You stole the night deposit from Wilbur Harkness. And right now, you're planning to buy a truck and take those Mexicans up to north county. Aren't you?"

Flabbergasted, young Timothy nodded his head in agreement. He screwed up his courage to ask, "How did you know?"

I'm going to show you something that nobody else knows around here," said the sheriff. "And they still won't know, because you are going to leave Farnsburg, aren't you?"

Again, young Timothy agreed.

The sheriff flipped up the eyepatch. It had the same sharp blue hue as the other.

"You mean there's nothing wrong with your eye?"

"That's right, boy. The better to see things with," said the sheriff. He added, "I do have one question.

"Why in hell did you bring up those watermelons and wetbacks in the first place. My information was you were dealing in used cars. Stolen used cars."

Young Timothy explained the whole scheme. "Somewhere along the line, somebody got mixed up and they sent me the real things. Real watermelons," he added with a pained expression.

"Farnsburg, do me one favor," asked the sheriff. "I'm going to

let you go. Because you didn't have any stolen cars and because you paid for the watermelons and because you destroyed those particular checks. And because what you did to Wilbur Harkness was the best joke anybody could play on him.

"Old man Doug Farnsburg probably wouldn't cotton to me throwing you in the slammer anyway. He'd just hire a good lawyer and get you off and it would cost the taxpayers a lot of money. You see?"

"I see. What's the favor?"

"Don't come back to Farnsburg," he said, looking young Timothy straight in the eye.

But of course, he really wasn't. He had replaced the patch and with the hidden eye whirling around like the beam on a radar screen, he was watching Cheri Berri get out of her car in Wilbur Harkness's parking lot. She wore a short yellow skirt. The wind was blowing.

Hector tugged at young Timothy's shirt sleeve.

"*Senor, senor.* The yellow. It's Gronsky's signal to meet us — "

Young Timothy interrupted him with a laugh and snicked the truckful of Mexicans into low gear.

Gronsky, he thought, was a funny name for a girl with legs like Cheri Berri.

Looking ahead at top-flight crime fiction to come...

THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION by D.C. Poyer

DYING IN DUBLIN by Jean Darling

IN A FOREIGN CITY by Edward D. Hoch

PIGEONS by James McKimmey

HIS NAME WAS LEGION by Bill Pronzini

THE LITTLE ROOM by Jack Ritchie

The Wreck

by KENNETH GAVRELL

Revenge Is Sweet — in Fact, the Slower the Sweeter.

JOHN HELPED me get the equipment out of the trunk.

"I'm unhappy to report that the beer's getting warm," he said.

"We'll drop it in the water someplace where it can't get washed away. By the time we get in, it'll be cold enough."

He looked up at the absolutely cloudless sky, at the sun just edging the mountains. "Jesus — Hawaii!" he said. "I feel fantastic."

"Hawaii makes a good first impression," I said.

"I only wish I'd come before. You know how it is—or how you can let it get to be. I owed myself this vacation."

We both had our arms full of diving gear—masks, snorkels, fins, spearguns, a stringer. John carried the six-pack of Falstaff.

"Aren't you going to lock the car?"

"No need," I said. "They can have the old clunk if they want it.

"Your own special spot?" He chuckled. "It looks like a long walk down."

"And a rough one," I said. "If you fall, just don't break the goddam diving mask."

We started over the steep black rocks toward the water welling below. The swells came in great glassy sweeps, crashed against the rocks, then retreated deeply, leaving white waterfalls all along the shore. To the left was a long bushy point, perhaps a quarter mile long, to the right nothing but straight rock coast as far as you could see. There wasn't a house or a paved road in sight. I felt good, too.

John teetered precariously just ahead of me. He was a big man with wrists like thick cable. Not fat, just big. But he always seemed to move in a clumsy fashion. Fat men can be graceful, but big men are often clumsy.

Once he almost fell and I could only watch helplessly, my hands full, hoping he wouldn't smash the mask. But he teetered back to the perpendicular and continued on down.

"Tough going, without being able to use your hands," he said across his shoulder.

I nodded agreement.

"Well, what next, teacher?" he said.

"Over there to the left is a long flat rock we can go off. See the one a few inches underwater?"

"See it," he said. "Say, what are those things?" He motioned

towards a cluster of long black needles in a pool of water at his feet.

"That's one reason I told you to wear tennis shoes. They're sea urchins."

He regarded them doubtfully. "What do they *do*?"

"They don't *do* anything, unless you happen to touch them. Then the needles break off in your skin and you have a bitch of a time trying to dig them out."

"Poisonous?"

"Not to me. I never heard of anyone being poisoned by them. I suppose you could get an infection though."

"You've had them in you?"

"Oh yes, more than once. Once I almost drowned when I got caught swimming in a bad undertow up on the north shore. But a big wave picked me up and dumped me on the rocks. I landed on my hands and knees in a bunch of sea urchins. Didn't get the last of them out for months."

"Jesus Christ. Don't know if I should go into this. I thought you were a good swimmer."

"I am a good swimmer, but it was a hell of a current and nobody could have swum out of it."

"Jesus Christ." He looked scared. "Anything like that around here?"

"Not that I know of."

"Where's that wreck you were talking about?"

"It's down towards that point. You can't see it from here."

"Is it a long swim?"

"You can swim forever with that snorkel in your mouth," I said. "There's nothing to worry about."

"I've never seen a sunken ship," he said.

"It's not exactly a ship," I said. "It's an old fishing boat."

"Surprised they haven't raised a tourist pavilion over it."

"I don't think anybody knows it's there," I said. "That's one great thing about this island, hundreds of miles of coast. You can dive all day without seeing another swimmer. It's even easy to find beaches that are empty."

"Well, let's have a look at it," John said.

We sloshed out into the shallow water over the big flat rock. There were quite a few sea urchins and the rock surface was covered with slimy brown seaweed.

"Where do we go off?" he asked.

"Not at the end, it's too rough."

"So I can see." We watched the swells smashing about twenty yards ahead of us. With each wave, a rush of colder water swished past our calves and then sucked back towards the sea. The seaweed swayed with the water like tall grass in a wind.

"There—to the right—is a good spot," I said. "Where it bows in slightly." I splashed ahead, leading the way.

At the edge, I lowered myself

into a sitting position, my feet dangling over the rock. John lowered himself beside me, then pulled his right arm up as if he'd been burned.

"Almost did it that time," he said. He leaned back so that I could see a wicked looking sea urchin ensconced in a weedy crevice beside him.

I grinned. "You'll learn to look for them," I said.

"I've already learned. The goddamn things are everywhere It's not very cold, is it."

"It's always like this," I said, "a little cooler during the winter months."

"The water in New York is always like ice," he said.

We sat for a minute and gazed idly at the mountains ahead along the shore. The sun felt good on my bare shoulders.

"You know," he said, "I didn't mean to put you out when I came in yesterday."

"No trouble," I said. "I'm glad you called me as soon as you got in. A bachelor's always looking for company."

"Yes, but usually female," John said.

"That's true."

"Boy, we really tied one on last night."

"I haven't drunk that much in years," I said.

"You know, it's good to see you again," John said. "I don't know another soul in this part of the world."

"Well, you're going to feel a little lost when you move on to Tokyo," I said.

"I guess you're right. It was a last-minute idea, this vacation. I just took two weeks off and left everything and *did* it. If I'd known sooner, I would have written or called you ahead."

"No problem—we're out of school now. I've got the whole summer free."

"How do you like teaching at the university?"

"It's all right. Good, I guess."

"Ha, you always were the schoolteacher type," he said.

What did that mean? "I guess I always knew what I was going to do," I admitted.

"Caroline kind of liked that about you, you know. That scholarly air."

"Once a scholar, always a scholar," I said. "Have you gotten over that? About Caroline, I mean."

His face flattened suddenly. "Oh, I guess I have," he said. "Three years is a pretty long time. Everything dulls, even something like that."

"I'm sorry I brought it up," I apologized.

"It's all right," he said. "I've got to learn to talk about it." He splashed some water over his husky shoulders. "You know, it's funny sitting here talking to you like this. I mean—about that. I feel that we're"—he looked for the right word—"closer now than

we were then. At that time I wasn't sure how much you liked me."

I laughed. "That was almost five years ago," I said. "We were different people."

"It *is* about five years, isn't it. Doesn't seem that long."

"Five years next month, " I said.

"My God, you even remember to the month!" he said, surprised.

"Oh, I have a great memory for minutiae," I said. "It's only important things that I forget."

I could see he was still working up his courage. Someone who had never dived before would be a little timid about trying it in water like this. I decided to wait as long as it took him to gather confidence.

Suddenly he snorted.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I was just thinking that I had a real talent for getting your goat in those days. Sometimes you seemed to take it pretty hard."

"I guess I was a little thin-skinned."

" 'Moody' is the word I'd have chosen."

"Yes, moody."

"But not anymore?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You know, Caroline *did* like you." He was still rhythmically sprinkling water on his shoulders. "I don't think she loved you—or she wouldn't have married me. But she liked you a lot."

"Caroline was a good girl," I said. "Was there any problem after the accident?" I tried to put it delicately, but I was curious.

"No. There could have been, but my father got me off."

"Ah, the politician.. I'd almost forgotten."

"If it weren't for that old son of a bitch," John said. "I'd probably be behind bars right now. Drunk driving can be a pretty heavy rap—when somebody gets killed."

"Did you get hurt yourself?"

"No," he said. "It's really ironic—not a scratch. Hey, let's change the subject, what say? How long's that sunken boat been out there?"

"Can't say," I answered. "Years, though. I found it about two years ago, You can tell by looking at it that it's been down there a long time."

"And how did it go down?" He was still stalling for time. I hadn't expected him to be so timid. It was hard for me to appreciate his feelings since I had been diving in much tougher water for years.

"My guess would be that it broke loose during a storm. Probably was anchored at that fishing village a ways back—you remember, we passed it as we drove up. Anyway the storm eventually carried it up to here, where it got smashed on the rocks and went down. There's a good-sized hole front starboard and the mast is smashed."

"God! I'm anxious to get a look at it," he said. "Let's get going."

"Okay. Dump that six-pack in there with your friend." I indicated the crevice in the rock with the sea urchin John had almost deneedled. "It'll be safe there."

He watched me to get the procedure. I slung the mask and snorkle over my arm and the gun and flippers under it. Then, with boith hands free, I slipped off the wet tennis shoes and tied the laces together. These I draped around my neck. Next I slipped on the fins. John followed my step by step.

"We're not going to swim with these things around our neck, are we?"

"No, I'll tie them to a piece of coral or rock."

"Ouch!" he said. "You've got small feet."

Actually I have fairly big feet, but the fins were clearly too tight on him. However, they'd do.

"Beggars can't be choosers." Nobody was going to out-cliche me today.

I attached the rolled-up plastic stringer to a loop on my bathing suit and swung the gun out from under my arm.

"Know how to use yours?" I asked. It was a silly question, since of course he wouldn't. I suppose I was trying to make him feel good, less of an utter novice.

"You'll have to show me."

"Give it here."

I showed him how to load the two rubber slings (noticing that one was nearly worn through and needed replacing) and then how the safety worked. I also threaded his spear line through the retaining clip.

"Just snap off the safety and pull the trigger," I said. I demonstrated, releasing the trident shaft into the clear green water. It went off with a snap and tugged hard as it reached the end of the line.

"Here—you reload it," I said.

"Powerful little devil," John remarked.

He pulled in the spear by its line and reinserted it through the holes until it clicked into postiion.

"You've put it in right," I said, "except that you've left one sling under the spear shaft. The notches are on the top." I released the shaft and pulled it out and showed him how the two slings had to rest. "Got it?"

"I don't make thirty thousand a year for nothing," he said. "Okay, load the slings."

He had trouble doing this until I again showed him how to hold the butt of the gun hard against his stomach and then pull back horizontally. But he was a powerful man and, after two tries, he was loading like a pro.

"You'll find it's a little harder while you're treading water," I said.

"I can do it," he said. "I'm a good swimmer. How big a fish will this thing kill?"

"Shoot at anything smaller than you," I said. "You'll miss it anyway."

"Ha!" he said, "I used to be a sharpshooter in the army."

"We'll see," I said. "It's a hell of a lot harder hitting something underwater. But there's one bright aspect—everything looks twice as large as it is. I'd recommend you get as close as possible and aim for dead center. Also that you not try to hit anything moving."

"You mean they'll just sit there and let me shoot at them."

"Sometimes. Especially if you catch them by surprise."

"How come your gun looks different from mine?"

"This is an air gun. It's considerably more powerful and considerably more expensive." I hesitated. "You can use this one if you want to."

"No, he laughed, "I'd probably just kill myself with it. This gun is fine for me. Look, I really do appreciate your taking me out today. Your time and the equipment and everything. I know I'm a pain in the ass."

His gratitude was embarrassing. I loaded the air gun, pushed the safety on, and laid it under my arm again. Then I showed him how to saliva the mask and rinse it. With his mask on, he looked strange. Pop-eyed. I supposed I looked strange, too.

"Is it tight?"

"Couldn't be tighter."

"You don't want any water to seep in."

"Don't worry, it won't."

"Well, all that's left is to stick the snorkel in your mouth and jump in. If you get water in the snorkel, just blow it out. Watch me."

I got to my feet and peered over the edge. The water was about twelve feet deep. There were little silver fish flitting through the underwater speckles of sunslight.

"Looks pretty," John said. "Say, is it going to be rough out there? Those swells look pretty big."

"No, they flatten out as soon as you get away from the shore. If you find yourself about to be smashed by one that's cresting, just dive under it. You won't even notice it." I anticipated his next question. "And it's not very deep either. No place around here is more than about twenty feet."

"Christ, that sun's roasting me."

I glanced at his white New York skin. "I should have remembered to tell you to bring a teeshirt."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "I don't get to go skin diving every day."

"Give me your tennis shoes."

He swung them across to me. I held them and my own in one hand and the speargun in the other. "Well, here goes," I said, biting down on the snorkel. I jumped off.

It felt good, as always, suspen-

ded over the sunlit greenness, the school of silvery fish flashing below. I looked back. John was right behind me, his mask half out of the water like a surfacing submarine.

I swung back to the rock and paddled along its weedy wall, looking for a place to tie the sneakers. John kept a little out to my right. I found a sharp jut of rock and attached them securely to it. Then I stuck my head above the surface and John bobbed up beside me.

"Just follow me," I said. "We should see some good fish along here. But for God's sake, keep your safety on unless you're actually taking a shot. I don't want to be your trophy for the day."

He nodded, then spit out his mouthpiece and said, "What kind of fish around here?"

"Parrots, groupers, lots of small tropicals—you'll see. I've never run into anything dangerous."

We stretched out along the surface and paddled straight out to past where the swells were breaking. Only two of them crested over us and we dove under them; John came through fine. Then I turned parallel to the shore, John heaving beside me like a dead whale in the glassy swells.

The water was about fifteen feet here, the bottom alternately rocky and sandy. Loose, stringy weed rolled with the currents on the bottom. I pointed out several large groupers to him—we couldn't get close enough for a shot—and a pair of tuna about two feet long. The tuna excited him and he wanted to give chase, but I explained to him that nothing could catch a tuna, even a baby one, except a speedboat.

About forty yards downshore, I saw the telltale swirl of octopus tentacles beside a rock on the bottom. I flipped off my safety and arched down into the silence. The octopus retreated quickly beneath the rock. I went down flat on the bottom and tried to see him under there, but couldn't. I gave it a try anyway and shot into the black hole. My spear-point chunked against rock and came out empty. My lungs were throbbing and I shot up for air.

"What was it?" John asked. "I didn't see anything."

"Octopus. A small one, a couple of pounds."

"Can't you get him?"

"Not under that rock. He won't show himself again."

"This thing has got some water in it that won't come out," John said. "It gurgles when I breathe."

"That's normal," I said. "You'll get used to it."

"Let me take a try at the next one," he said. He was really anxious.

"All right. Keep your eyes open."

Maybe ten minutes later, we hit a school of small bonefish, the grey ghosts of sandy bottoms. Bonefish are fast, but you can

lead them and often hit. I'd had pretty good luck with them.

John tried leading two that were finning along the sand confidently, but missed by a hair both times. He became a little discouraged. But he didn't seem to have any trouble reloading the gun in the water, and he dove very well, bending at the waist and kicking up, so that he shot straight down through the water.

"Where'd you pick up your diving?" I asked.

"Just been watching you."

"You're a natural."

He grinned. "Can't get down too far though. What would you say—about twelve feet?"

"About that."

"My ears begin to hurt."

"Pop them by holding your mask nose and blowing like this."

"Got it," he said.

After a few more dives, he was getting down to fifteen feet and staying reasonably long.

Halfway to the wreck, I chased a three-pound grouper under some rocks and got him. The grouper had darted for cover under the rocks, but hadn't realized that the last third of him was still exposed. I got him about four inches above the tail. The single-pointed spear made a sizable hole, but with the long, swiveled barb, it was impossible for him to tear off.

"Super," I said, holding him above water on the end of the spear.

"A beauty," John said enviously.

I strung the fish through the lower lip onto the stringer before taking the spear out. It was necessary to push the spear through and remove the point in order to get him off. In water where there were sharks or big barracuda, I wouldn't carry a fish with me on the stringer, but I'd dived here many times over the years and had never seen anything dangerous. So I had become careless.

By now, the sun had climbed and become quite hot. John was already noticeably pink. I liked this stretch of shoreline because the bottom was so diverse, with so many different kinds of coverweed, rocks, holes, sand, coral- and different kinds of fish.

In one sandy area we spotted several pale goatfish—John again trying and missing— and once, in a weedy spot, a speckled eel about as long as a man's arm. When I recognized a rocky section that jutted out from shore about a hundred yards short of the wreck, John let out a yell. I swam over to him.

He pointed mutely, pop-eyed, at four large, round orange-and-purple blobs pulsating in the surface twenty feet away.

"Some sort of jellyfish," I said. "I see them around here often. They come in with the tide, I think."

"Are they poisonous?"

"I don't know. I never got close enough to find out."

"Do they attack you?"

"I don't think they've any means of locomotion."

"Then why do they pulsate like that?"

"Don't know. Just give them a wide berth. If necessary, swim under them. They're always near the surface."

"Is it far to the wreck?"

"No, we're almost there."

"Good!"

"Getting tired?" I asked.

"A little."

"Just relax. You can float forever with that gear. We'll take it easy."

We took it easy and John was the first to make out the shadowy silhouette of the sea wreck ahead. The water around it was somewhat silty and we didn't get a good view of it until we were quite close. John immediately seemed to recover his enthusiasm. I had to swim hard to keep up with him.

It had once been a green-and-white boat, single-masted, with a tall cabin, inboard motor, storage space below deck and fish boxes above. It had cut a path through the same rhythmic swells that now rolled fifteen feet above its splintered mast. Now it leaned wearily on its broken right elbow, half buried in the sand, its wood coated with barnacles and algal slime.

I pointed out the hole near the bow and John upended in the surface to examine it. It was marvelous how fast he had learned to dive well.

"She got banged up all right," he said as he popped back. "I think you're right about what happened. There's still a remnant of rope tied to its bow."

We dove together and examined the cabin and then circled the boat. There was no hurry. On the port side, a big blue parrot fish flashed from nowhere and cut across our path not five feet away. John was startled for an instant and then took off after the fish. I watched, amused.

A parrot fish will always manage to stay just out of gun range, winking over his shoulder at your frustration. This one proceeded to swim in great circles, John right behind him. Whenever John got fairly close, the fish would suddenly dash away, swimming half on its side, one eye always on John and a sly Machiavellian smile on its beak.

I left them to this entertainment and went down to have a look in the storage hole. I'd often surprised a fish there. The parrot fish had stirred up more silt and it was harder to see; in any case, I nearly rubbed noses with a long, toothy snout that drifted suddenly out of the darkness. I backed off fast, and a three-foot barracuda came half out of the hatchway, waiting for whatever came next.

I returned to the surface and

watched him from a distance. John paddled up to me, having learned about parrot fishes. "Look down there," I said, "near the storage hold."

The barracuda had drifted completely out and hung just above the opening—long, grey, and vicious-looking in the silty underwater light. Even a small barracuda looks unpleasant with its pugnacious jaw and the supreme self-confidence of its manner.

"Shall we shoot him?" John asked. "It's a barracuda, isn't it?"

"I don't like to shoot them. I don't know how he'd react if I missed."

We watched the fish in silence and eventually he tailed off into the hazy greenness and disappeared.

"I'd like to shoot one," John said.

"It's too late now."

"Probably not a good idea for you to swim around with that dead fish on you."

"No." I blew some water out of my mask valve. "Did you notice the name of the boat?"

"No. Is is still legible?"

"Yes. Up front."

"Well, let's take a look."

We swam above the bow and John dove down; I flicked off my safety and followed him.

The painted name was covered with slime but John began to rub at it with his hand. Soon he had got it clean enough to read—the *Bon Voyage*. John's hand was resting flat against the bow and I took careful aim, and the spear left my gun with a whooshing sound and went cleanly through the center of his hand and well into the wood.

A pneumatic gun is powerful and even a man as big as John would not be able to pull that spear out with his left hand. He crumpled against the wood like a wounded crab, his speargun drifting to the sand with a poof, and then he turned to me with utter panic in his eyes.

His hand was bleeding, the blood sifting off into the water like smoke. I drew back and watched. The horrible realization was beginning to show in his eyes. Then he began to struggle frantically against the spear. It seemed strange, so much movement without a sound.

Already my lungs were bursting, and I knew his must feel worse. I held on as long as I could, watching his efforts become more and more frantic, and then shot up for air. I took in two or three huge gulps and dove again—staying well out of his reach.

He was still struggling, but more feebly. There was no getting that spear out. The barb had probably passed right through the wood. In a short time his exertions stopped altogether and I saw telltale bubbles rising from his snorkel. Even John, the man who could emerge from fatal car

accidents without a scratch, couldn't breathe water.

He turned slowly towards me, hanging limply on the end of the spear. His eyes were still open, still filled with incredulous horror. But the understanding had come. I felt that it had. Some stray bubbles still rose from his useless snorkel. Then the eyes closed, as from unutterable pain, the bubbles ceased, and he hung limp from the wreck, his fins just brushing the sand.

I needed more air and rose for half a minute. Then I went down for the last time and retrieved his speargun from near his feet. I'd leave him mine as a going-away present. That barracuda would probably return shortly, attracted by the smell of blood. It was time to leave them.

I began to stroke back up the shoreline in a leisurely manner. The sun was hot on my back, but a small breeze alleviated it. My hands were trembling slightly, but that would soon stop. As would the banging of my heart against my ribs.

I remembered to stop for the tennis shoes, letting John's fall into the brown weed at the bottom. I felt very tired as I pulled myself back onto the rock from which we had started. After resting at the edge for a while, I got up to check the beer we had left to cool. It still lay secure in its crevice, guarded by the sea urchin.

I opened a can and drank it quickly. Not as cold as I would have liked, but pleasant. I was very thirsty. I opened another and sat again at the edge of the rock, just at the place where we had entered, and drank the beer more slowly, letting the sun and breeze dry my back and shoulders.

The mountains looked slightly hazy in the hot light. Although the sky overhead was still clear, dark clouds had begun to form further inland. The sea swells had smoothed a bit.

It had been perfect. Nobody would know about me. After a while it would be presumed that he had drowned at some beach and the body had not been recovered. That sort of thing happened frequently. There was no one who would care enough about him to think about it any further.

By the time I had finished the second beer, my upper body was dry; I pulled on my wet tennis shoes and picked up what was left of the six-pack. I felt a little dizzy as I got up. It became suddenly quite bad and I bent over and vomited a couple of times into the shallow water over the rock. Then I felt much better.

I worked my way back to the car, threw the equipment in the trunk and the beer on the front seat, toweled off my legs, and began driving slowly up the bumpy dirt road towards the highway. It was going to be all right.

The Ehrengraf Appointment

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

Ehrengraf Always Assumed his Clients were Innocent— Even if, as in the Arnold Protter Case, this took a Bit of Doing.

MARTIN EHRENGRAF was walking jauntily down the courthouse steps when a taller and bulkier man caught up with him. "Glorious day," the man said. "Simply a glorious day."

Ehrengraf nodded. It was indeed a glorious day, the sort of autumn afternoon that made men recall football weekends.

"I'm Cutliffe," the man said. "Hudson Cutliffe, of Marquardt, Stoner and Cutliffe."

"Ehrengraf," said Ehrengraf.

"Yes, I know. Oh, believe me, I know." Cutliffe gave what he doubtless considered a hearty chuckle. "Imagine running into Martin Ehrengraf himself, standing in line for an IDC appointment just like everybody else."

"Every man is entitled to a proper defense," Ehrengraf said stiffly. "It's a guaranteed right in a free society."

"Yes, to be sure, but —"

"Indigent defendants have attorneys appointed by the court. Our system here calls for attorneys to make themselves available at specified intervals for such appointments, rather than entrust such cases to a public defender."

"I quite understand," Cutliffe said. "Why, I was just appointed to an IDC case myself, some luckless chap who stole a satchel full of meat from a supermarket. Choice cuts, too — lamb chops, filet mignon.

Ehrengraf, a recent convert to vegetarianism, offered a thin-lipped smile and thought about pie and cheese.

"But Martin Ehrengraf himself," Cutliffe went on. "One no more thinks of you in this context than one imagines a glamorous Hollywood actress going to the bathroom.

You actually take murder cases on a contingency basis?"

"That's correct."

"Extraordinary. I don't see how you can possibly afford to operate that way."

"It's quite simple," Ehrengraf said. "I always win,"

"And when your client wins his freedom—"

"I'm paid in full," Ehrengraf said.

"Your fees are high, I understand."

"Exceedingly high."

"And your clients almost always get off."

"They're always innocent," Ehrengraf said. "That does help."

Hudson Cutliffe laughed richly, as if to suggest that the idea of bringing guilt and innocence into a discussion of legal procedures was amusing. "Well, this will be a switch for you," he said at length. "You were assigned the Protter case, weren't you?"

"Mr. Protter is my client, yes."

"Hardly a typical Ehrengraf case, is it? Man gets drunk, beats his wife to death, passes out and sleeps it off, then wakes up and sees what he's done and calls the police. Bit of luck, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh?"

"Won't take up too much of your time. You'll plead him guilty to manslaughter, possibly get a reduced sentence on grounds of his previous clean record, and then Protter'll do a year or two in prison while you go about your business."

"You think that's the course I'll pursue, Mr. Cutliffe?"

"It's what anyone would do."

"*Almost* anyone," said Ehrengraf.

"And there's no reason to make work for yourself, is there?" Cutliffe winked. "These IDC cases — I don't know why they pay us at all, as small as the fees are. $175 isn't much of an all-inclusive fee for a legal defense, is it? Wouldn't you say your average fee runs a bit higher than that?"

"Quite a bit higher."

"But there are compensations. It's the same $175 whether you plead your client or stand trial, let alone win. A far cry from your usual system, eh, Ehrengraf? You don't have to win to get paid."

"*I* do," Ehrengraf said.

"How's that?"

"If I lose the case, I'll donate the fee to charity."

"*If* you lose? But you'll plead him to manslaughter, won't you?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what will you do?"

"I'll plead him innocent."

"Innocent?"

"Of course. The man never killed anyone."

"But —" Cutliffe inclined his head, dropped his voice. "You *know* the man?

"I've never met him and know only what I've read in the newspapers."

"Then how can you say he's innocent?"

"I do not represent the guilty," Ehrengraf said. "My clients are innocent, Mr. Cutliffe, and Arnold Protter is a client of mine, and I intend to earn my fee as his attorney, however inadequate that fee may be. I did not seek appointment, Mr. Cutliffe, but that

appointment is a sacred trust, sir, and I shall justify that trust. Good day, Mr. Cutliffe."

"They said they'd get me a lawyer and it wouldn't cost me nothing," Arnold Protter said. "I guess you're it, huh?"

"Indeed," said Ehrengraf. He glanced around the sordid little jail cell, then cast an eye on his new client. Arnold Protter was a thickset round-shouldered man in his late thirties with the ample belly of a beer drinker and the red nose of a whiskey drinker. His pudgy face recalled the Pillsbury Dough Boy. His hands, too, were pudgy, and he held them out in front of his red nose and studied them in wonder.

"These were the hands that did it," he said.

"Perhaps you'd better tell me what happened," Ehrengraf suggested. "The night your wife was killed."

"It's hard to remember," Protter said.

"I'm sure it is."

"What it was, it was an ordinary kind of night. Me and Gretch had a beer or two during the afternoon, just passing time while we watched television. Then we ordered up a pizza and had a couple more with it, and then we settled in for the evening and started hitting the boilermakers. You know, a shot and a beer. First thing you know, we're having this argument."

"About what?"

Protter got up, paced, glared again at his hands. He lumbered about, Ehrengraf thought, like a caged bear. His chino pants were ragged at the cuffs and his plaid shirt bore a tartan no Highlander would recognize. Ehrengraf, in contrast, sparkled in the drab cell like a diamond on a dustheap.

His suit was a herringbone tweed the color of a well-smoked briar pipe and beneath it he wore a suede doeskin vest over a cream broadcloth shirt with French cuffs and a tab collar. His cufflinks were simple gold hexagons, his tie a wool knit in the same brown as his suit. His shoes were shell cordovan loafers, quite simple and elegant and polished to a high sheen.

"The argument," Ehrengraf prompted.

"Oh, I don't know how it got started," Protter said. "One thing led to another, and pretty soon she's making a federal case over me and this woman who lives one flight down from us."

"What woman?"

"Her name's Agnes Mullane. Gretchen's giving me the business that me and Agnes got something going."

"And were you having an affair with Agnes Mullane?"

"Naw, course not. Maybe me and Agnes'd pass the time of day on the staircase, and maybe I had some thoughts on the subject, but nothing ever came of it. But she started in on the subject, Gretch did, and to

get a little of my own back I started ragging her about this guy who lives one flight up from us."

"And his name is—"

"Gates, Harry Gates."

"You thought your wife was having an affair with Gates?"

Protter shook his head. "Naw, course not. But he's an artist, Gates is, and I was accusing her of posing for him, you know. Naked. No clothes on."

"Nude?"

"Yeah."

"And did your wife pose for Mr. Gates?"

"You kidding? You never met Gretchen, did you?"

Ehrengraf shook his head.

"Well, Gretch was all right, and the both of us was used to each other, if you know what I mean, but you wouldn't figure her for somebody who woulda been Miss America if she coulda found her way to Atlantic City. And Gates—what would he need with a model?"

"You said he was an artist."

"*He* says he's an artist," Protter said, "but you couldn't prove it by me. What he paints don't look like nothing. I went up there one time on account of his radio's cooking full blast, you know, and I want to ask him to put a lid on it, and he's up on top of this stepladder dribbling paint on a canvas that he's got spread out all over the floor. All different colors of paint, and he's just throwing them down at the canvas like a little kid making a mess."

"Then he's an abstract expressionist," Ehrengraf said.

"Naw, he's a painter. I mean, people buy these pictures of his. Not enough to make him rich or he wouldn't be living in the same dump with me and Gretch, but he makes a living at it. Enough to keep him in beer and pizza and all, but what would he need with a model? Only reason he'd want Gretchen up there is to hold the ladder steady."

"An abstract expressionist," said Ehrengraf. "That's very interesting. He lives directly above you, Mr. Protter?"

"Right upstairs, yeah. That's why we could hear his radio clear as a bell."

"Was it playing the night you and your wife drank the boilermakers?"

"We drank boilermakers lots of the time," Protter said, puzzled. "Oh, you mean the night I killed her."

"The night she died."

"Same thing, ain't it?"

"Not at all," said Ehrengraf. "But let it go. Was Mr. Gates playing his radio that night?"

Protter scratched his head. "Hard to remember," he said. "One night's like another, know what I mean? Yeah, the radio was going that night. I remember now. He was playing country music on it. Usually he plays that rock and roll, and that stuff

gives me a headache, but this time it was country music. Country music, it sort of soothes my nerves." He frowned. "But I never played it on my own radio."

"Why was that?"

"Gretch hated it. Couldn't stand it, said the singers all sounded like dogs that ate poisoned meat and was dying of it. Gretch didn't like any music much. What she liked was the television, and then we'd have Gates with his rock and roll at top volume, and sometimes you'd hear a little country music coming upstairs from Agnes's radio.

"She liked country music, but she never played it very loud. With the windows open on a hot day you'd hear it, but otherwise no. Of course what you hear most with the windows open is the Puerto Ricans on the street with their transister radios."

Protter went on at some length about Puerto Ricans and transistor radios. When he paused for breath, Ehrengraf straightened up and smiled with his lips. "A pleasure," he said. "Mr. Protter, I believe in your innocence."

"Huh?"

"You've been the victim of an elaborate and diabolical frame-up, sir. But you're in good hands now. Maintain your silence and put your faith in me. Is there anything you need to make your stay more comfortable?"

"It's not so bad."

"Well, you won't be here for long. I'll see to that. Perhaps I can arrange for a radio for you. You could listen to country music."

"Be real nice," Protter said. "Soothing is what it is. It soothes my nerves."

An hour after his interview with his client, Ehrengraf was seated on a scarred wooden bench at a similarly distressed oaken table. The restaurant in which he was dining ran to college pennants and German beer steins suspended from the exposed dark wood beams. Ehrengraf was eating hot apple pie topped with sharp cheddar, and at the side of his plate was a small glass of neat Calvados.

The little lawyer was just preparing to take his first sip of the tangy apple brandy when a familiar voice sounded beside him.

"Ehrengraf," Hudson Cutliffe boomed out. "Fancy finding you here! Twice in one day, eh?"

Ehrengraf looked up, smiled. "Excellent pie here," he said.

"Come here all the time," Cutliffe said. "My home away from home. Never seen you here before, I don't think."

"My first time."

"Pie with cheese. If I ate that I'd put on ten pounds." Unbidden, the hefty attorney drew back the bench opposite Ehrengraf and seated himself. When a waiter appeared, Cutliffe ordered a slice of prime rib and a spinach salad.

"Watching my weight," he said. "Protein, that's the ticket. Got to cut down on the nasty old carbs. Well, Ehrengraf, I suppose you've seen your wife-murderer by now, haven't you? Or are you still maintaining he's no murderer at all?"

"Protter's an innocent man."

Cutliffe chuckled. "Commendable attitude, I'm sure, but why don't you save it for the courtroom? The odd juryman may be impressed by that line of country. I'm not, myself. I've always found facts more convincing than attitudes."

"Indeed," said Enrengraf. "Personally, I've always noticed the shadow as much as the substance. I suspect it's a difference of temperament, Mr. Cutliffe. I don't suppose you're much of a fan of poetry, are you?"

"Poetry? You mean rhymes and verses and all that?"

"More or less."

"Schoolboy stuff, eh? *Boy stood on the burning deck,* that the sort of thing you mean? Had a bellyful of that in school." He smiled suddenly. "Unless you're talking about limericks. I like the odd limerick now and then, I must say. Are you much of a hand for limericks?"

"Not really," said Ehrengraf.

Cutliffe delivered four limericks while Ehrengraf sat with a pained expression on his face. The first concerned a mathematician named Paul, the second a young harlot named Dinah, the third a man from Fort Ord, and the fourth an old woman from Truk.

"It's interesting," Ehrengraf said at length. "On the surface, there's no similarity whatsoever between the limerick and abstract expressionist painting. They're not at all alike. And yet they are."

"I don't follow you."

"It's not important," Ehrengraf said. The waiter appeared, setting a plateful of rare beef in front of Cutliffe, who at once reached for his knife and fork. Ehrengraf looked at the meat. "You're going to eat that?" he said.

"Of course. What else would I do with it?"

Ehrengraf took another small sip of the Calvados. Holding the glass aloft, he began an apparently aimless dissertation upon the innocence of his client.

"If you were a reader of poetry," he found himself saying, "and if you did not systematically dull your sensibilities by consuming the flesh of the beasts, Mr. Protter's innocence would be obvious to you."

"You're serious about defending him, then. You're really going to plead him innocent."

"How could I do otherwise?"

Cutliffe raised an eyebrow while lowering a fork. "You realize you're letting an idle whim jeopardize a man's liberty, Ehrengraf. Your Mr. Protter will surely receive a stiffer sentence after

he's been found guilty by a jury, and —"

"But he won't be found guilty."

"Are you counting on some technicality to get him off the hook? Because I have a friend in the District Attorney's office, you know, and I went round there while you were visiting your client. He tells me the state's case is gilt-edged."

Cutliffe put down his fork, set his jaw. "Perhaps," he said, "perhaps you simply do not care. Perhaps, having no true financial stake in Arnold Protter's fate, you just don't give a damn what happens to him. Whereas, had you a substantial sum riding on the outcome of the case —"

"Oh, dear!" said Ehrengraf. "You're not by any chance proposing a wager?"

Miss Agnes Mullane had had a permanent recently, and her copper-colored hair looked as though she'd stuck her big toe in an electric socket. She had a freckled face, a pug nose and a body that would send whole shifts of construction workers plummeting from their scaffolds. She wore a hostess outfit of a silky green fabric, and her walk, Ehrengraf noted, was decidedly slinky.

"So terrible about the Protters," she said. "They were good neighbors, although I never became terribly close with either of them. She kept to herself, for the most part, but he always had a smile and a cheerful word for me when I ran into him on the stairs. Of course, I've always gotten along better with men than women, Mr. Ehrengraf, though I'm sure I couldn't tell you why."

"Indeed," said Ehrengraf.

"You'll have some more tea, Mr. Ehrengraf?"

"If I may."

She leaned forward, displaying an alluring portion of herself to Ehrengraf as she filled his cup from a Dresden teapot. Then she set the pot down and straightened up with a sigh.

"Poor Mrs. Protter," she said. "Death is so final."

"Given the present state of medical science."

"And poor *Mr.* Protter. Will he have to spend many years in prison, Mr. Ehrengraf?"

"Not with a proper defense. Tell me, Miss Mullane. Mrs. Protter accused your husband of having an affair with you. I wonder why she should have brought such an accusation."

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Of course you're a very attractive woman — "

"Do you really think so, Mr. Ehrengraf?"

"— and you live by yourself, and tongues *will* wag."

"I'm a respectable woman, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"I'm sure you are."

"And I would never have an affair with anyone who lived here in this building. Discretion,

Mr. Ehrengraf, is very important to me."

"I sensed that, Miss Mullane." The little lawyer got to his feet, walked to the window. The afternoon was warm, and the strains of Latin music drifted up through the open window from the street below.

"Transistor radios," Agnes Mullane said. "They carry them everywhere."

"So they do. When Mrs. Protter made that accusation, Miss Mullane, her husband denied it."

"Why, I should *hope* so!"

"And he in turn accused her of carrying on with Mr. Gates. Have I said something funny, Miss Mullane?"

Agnes Mullane managed to control her laughter. "Mr. Gates is an artist," she said.

"A painter, I'm told. Would that canvas be one of his?"

"I'm afraid not. He paints abstracts. I prefer representatational art myself, as you can see."

"And country music."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. You're sure Mr. Gates was not having an affair with Mrs. Protter?"

"Positive." Her brow clouded for an instant, then cleared completely. "No," she said, "Harry Gates would never have been involved with her. But what's the point, Mr. Ehrengraf? Are you trying to establish a defense of justifiable homicide? The unwritten and all that?"

"Not exactly."

"Because I really don't think it would work, do you?"

"No," said Ehrengraf, "I don't suppose it would."

Miss Mullane leaned forward again, not to pour tea but with a similar effect. "It's so noble of you," she said, "donating your time for poor Mr. Protter."

The Court appointed me, Miss Mullane."

"Yes, but surely not all appointed attorneys work so hard on these cases, do they?"

"Perhaps not."

"That's what I thought." She ran her tongue over her lips. "Nobility is an attractive quality in a man," she said thoughtfully. "And I've always admired men who dress well, and who bear themselves elegantly."

Ehrengraf smiled. He was wearing a pale blue cashmere sport jacket over a Wedgwood blue shirt. His tie matched his jacket, with an intricate below-the-knot design in gold thread.

"A lovely jacket," Miss Mullane purred. She reached over, laid a hand on Ehrengraf's sleeve. "Cashmere," she said. "I love the feel of cashmere."

"Thank you."

"And gray flannel slacks. What a fine fabric! Come with me, Mr. Ehrengraf. I'll show you where to hang your things."

In the bedroom Miss Mullane

paused to switch on the radio. Loretta Lynn was singing something about having been born a coal miner's daughter.

"My one weakness," Miss Mullane said, "or should I say one of my two weaknesses, along with a weakness for well dressed men of noble character. I hope you don't mind country music, Mr. Ehrengraf?"

"Not at all," said Ehrengraf. "I find it soothing."

Several days later, when Arnold Protter was released from jail, Ehrengraf was there to meet him. "I want to shake your hand," he told him, extending his own. "You're a free man now, Mr. Protter, I only regret I played no greater part in securing your freedom."

Protter pumped the lawyer's hand enthusiastically. "Hey, listen," he said,"you're ace-high with me, Mr. Ehrengraf. You believed in me when nobody else did, including me myself. I'm just now trying to take all of this in, I'll tell you, I never would have dreamed Agnes Mullane killed my wife."

"It's the craziest thing I ever heard of. Let me see if I got the drift of it straight. My Gretchen was carrying on with Gates after all. I thought it was just a way to get in a dig at her accusing her of carrying on with him, but actually it was happening all the time."

"So it would seem."

"And that's why she got so steamed when I brought it up." Protter nodded, wrapped up in thought. "Anyway, Gates also had something going with Agnes Mullane. You know something, Mr. Ehrengraf? He musta been nuts. Why would anybody who was getting next to Agnes want to bother with Gretchen?"

"Artists perceive the world differently from the rest of us, Mr. Protter."

"If that's a polite way of saying he was cockeyed. I sure gotta go along with you on that. So here he's getting it on with the both of then, and Agnes finds out, and she's jealous. How do you figure she found out?"

"It's always possible Gates told her,"Ehrengraf suggested. "Or perhaps she heard you accusing your wife of infidelity. You and Gretchen had both been drinking, and your argument may have been a loud one."

"Could be. A few boilermakers and I tend to raise my voice."

"Most people do. Or perhaps Miss Mullane saw some of Gate's sketches of your wife. I understand there were several found in his apartment. He may have been an abstract expressionist, but he seems to have been capable of realistic sketches of nudes. Of course he's denied they were his work, but he'd be likely to say that, wouldn't he?"

"I guess so," Protter said. "Naked pictures of Gretchen—gee, you never know, do you?"

"You never do," Ehrengraf agreed. "In any event, Miss Mullane had a key to your apartment. One was found among her effects. Perhaps it was Gates' key, perhaps Gretchen had given it to him and Agnes Mullane had stolen it.

"She let herself into your apartment, found you and your wife unconscious, and pounded your wife on the head with an empty beer bottle. Your wife was alive when Miss Mullane entered your apartment, Mr. Protter, and dead when she left it."

"So I didn't kill her after all."

"Indeed you did not." Ehrengraf smiled for a moment. Then his face turned grave. "Agnes Mullane was not cut out for murder," he said. "At heart she was a gentle soul. I realized that at once when I spoke with her."

"You went and talked to Agnes?"

The little lawyer nodded. "I suspect my interview with her may have driven her over the edge," he said. "Perhaps she sensed that I was suspicious of her. She wrote out a letter to the police, detailing what she had done.

"Then she must have gone upstairs to Mr. Gates's apartment, because she managed to secure a .25-calibre automatic pistol registered to him. She returned to her own apartment, put the weapon to her chest, and shot herself in the heart."

"She had some chest, too."

Ehrengraf did not comment.

"I'll tell *you*," Protter said, "the whole thing's a little too complicated for a simple guy like me to take it all in all at once. I can see why it was open and shut as far as the cops were concerned.

"There's me and the wife drinking, and there's me and the wife fighting, and the next thing you know she's dead and I'm sleeping it off. If it wasn't for you, I'd be doing time for killing her."

"I played a part," Ehrengraf said modestly. "But it's Agnes Mullane's conscience that saved you from prison."

"Poor Agnes!"

"A tortured, tormented woman, Mr. Protter."

"I don't know about that," Protter said. "But she had *some* body on her, I'll say that for her." He drew a breath. "What about you Mr. Ehrengraf? You did a real job for me. I wish I could pay you."

"Don't worry about it."

"I guess the court pays you something, huh?"

"There's a set fee of $175, Ehrengraf said, "but I don't know that I'm eligible to receive it in this instance because of the disposition of the case. The argument may be raised

that I didn't really perform any actions on your behalf, that charges were simply dropped."

"You mean you'll get gypped out of your fee? That's a hell of a note, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"Oh, don't worry about it," said Ehrengraf. "It's not important in the overall scheme of things."

Ehrengraf, his blue pinstripe suit setting off his Caedmon Society striped necktie, sipped daintily at Calvados. It was Indian Summer this afternoon, far too balmy for hot apple pie with cheddar cheese. He was eating instead a piece of cold apple pie topped with vanilla ice cream, and had discovered that Calvados went every bit as nicely with that dish.

Across from him, Hudson Cutliffe sat with a plate of lamb stew. When Cutliffe ordered the dish, Ehrengraf had refrained from commenting on the barbarity of slaughtering lambs and stewing them. He had decided to ignore the contents of Cutliffe's plate. Whatever he had ordered, Ehrengraf intended that the man should eat crow today.

"You," said Cutliffe, "are the most astonishingly fortunate lawyer who ever passed the bar."

"Dame Fortune is a fickle gypsy, and always blind, and often tipsy," Ehrengraf quoted. "Winthrop Macworth Praed, born 1802, died 1839. But you don't care for poetry, do you? Perhaps you'd prefer the elder Pliny's observation upon the eruption of Vesuvius. He said that Fortune favors the brave."

"A cliche, isn't it?"

"Perhaps it was rather less a cliche when Pliny said it." Ehrengraf spoke gently, "But that's beside the point. My client was innocent, just as I told you—"

"How on earth could you have known it?"

"I didn't have to know it. I presumed it, Mr. Cutliffe, as I always presume my clients to be innocent, and as in time they are invariably proven to be. And, because you were so incautious as to insist upon a wager—"

"Insist!"

"It was indeed your suggestion," Ehrengraf said. "I did not seek *you* out, Mr. Cutliffe. I did not seat myself unbidden at *your* table."

"You came to this restaurant" Cutliffe said darkly. "You deliberately baited me, goaded me. You—"

"Oh come now," Ehrengraf said. "You make me sound like what priests would call an occasion of sin or lawyers an attractive nuisance. I came here for apple pie with cheese, Mr. Cutliffe, and you proposed a wager. Now my client has been released and all charges dropped, and I believe you owe me money."

'It's not as if *you* got him off. Fate got him off.''

Ehrengraf rolled his eyes. ''Oh, please, Mr. Cutliffe,'' he said. ''I've had clients take that stance, you know, and they always change their minds in the end. My agreement with them has always been that my fee is payable upon their release, whether the case comes to court or not, whether or not I have played any evident part in their salvation. I specified precisely those terms when we arranged our little wager.''

''Of course, gambling debts are not legally collectible in this state.''

''Of course they are not, Mr. Cutliffe. Yours is purely a debt of honor, an attribute which you may or may not be said to possess in accordance with your willingness to write out a check. But I trust you are an honorable man, Mr. Cutliffe.''

Their eyes met. After a long moment, Cutliffe drew a checkbook from his pocket. ''I feel I've been manipulated in some devious fashion,'' he said, ''but at the same time I can't gloss over the fact that I owe you money.''

He opened the checkbook, uncapped a pen and filled out the check quickly, signing it with a flourish. Ehrengraf smiled narrowly, placing the check in his own wallet without noting the amount. It was, let it be said, an impressive sum.

''An astonishing case,'' Cutliffe said, ''even if you yourself had the smallest of parts in it. This morning's news was the most remarkable thing of all.''

''Oh?''

''I'm referring to Gates's confession of course.''

''Gates's confession?''

''You haven't heard? Oh, this *is* rich. Harry Gates is in jail. He went to the police and confessed to murdering Gretchen Protter.''

''Gates murdered Gretchen Protter?''

''No question about it. It seems he shot her, used the very same small-calibre automatic pistol that the Mullane woman stole and used to kill herself. He was having an affair with both the women, just as Agnes said in her suicide note.

''He heard Protter accuse his wife of infidelity and was afraid Agnes Mullane would find out he'd been carrying on with Gretchen Protter. So he went down there looking to clear the air, and he had the gun along for protection, and — are you sure you didn't know about this?''

''Keep talking,'' Ehrengraf said.

''Well, he found the two of them out cold. At first he thought Gretchen was dead but he saw she was breathing, and he took a raw potato from the refrigerator and used it as a silencer, and he shot Gretchen in the heart.

"They never found the bullet during post-mortem examination because they weren't looking for it, just assumed massive skull injuries had caused her death but after he confessed they looked, and there was a bullet right where he said it would be, and Gates is in jail charged with her murder."

"Why on earth did he confess?"

"He was in love with Agnes Mullane," Cutliffe said. "That's why he killed Gretchen. Then Agnes Mullane killed herself taking the blame for a crime Gates committed, and he cracked wide open. Figures her death was some sort of divine retribution, and he has to clear things by paying the price for the Protter woman's death.

"The D.A. thinks perhaps he killed them both, faked Agnes Mullane's confession note and then couldn't win the battle with his own conscience. He insists he didn't, of course, just as he insists he didn't draw nude sketches of either of the women.

"But it seems there's some question now about the validity of Agnes Mullane's suicide note, so it may well turn out that Gates killed her, too. Because, if Gates killed Gretchen why would Agnes have committed suicide?"

"I'm sure there are any number of possible explanations," Ehrengraf said, his fingers worrying the tips of his neatly trimmed moustache. "Any number of explanations. Do you know the epitaph Andrew Marvell wrote for a lady?

To say—she lived a virgin chaste
In this age loose and all unlaced;
Nor was, when vice is so allowed,
Of virtue or ashamed or proud;
That her soul was on Heaven so bent,
No minute but it came and went;
That, ready her last debt to pay,
She summed her life up every day;
Modest as morn, as mid-day bright
Gentle as evening, cool as night
—'Tis true; but all too weakly said;
'Twas more significant, she's dead.

"She's dead, Mr. Cutliffe, and we may leave her to Heaven as another poet has said. My client was innocent. That's the only truly relevant point. My client was innocent."

"As you somehow knew all along."

"As I knew all along, yes. Yes, indeed, as I knew all along." Ehrengraf's fingers drummed the table top. "Perhaps you could get our waiter's eye," he suggested. "I think I might enjoy another glass of Calvados."

Long Gone, Forever

by JOE R. LANSDALE

Slater's Heart Was as Soft as His Hide Was Tough—But He Had No Mercy for the Merciless.

OLD MAN SAVAGE'S driveway seemed full of a cool beige limousine. It looked as comfortable as a high floating cloud and made Raymond Slater, private detective, all the more aware of his ragged '69, red Chevy. Slater clattered up behind the limo, parked and got out.

The Savage residence was a vast expanse of emerald grass and brilliant design with a circular drive and plenty of well-clipped flower beds. There was a white marble fountain on the front lawn, and two naked pixy statuettes perched on its rim spat water into it. A more than warm breeze blew across the grass as if it were trespassing and trying to be damn quiet about it.

It was easily 98 degrees and, with no air-conditioning in his car, Slater was as hot and damp as a piece of steamed fish. But that was Pasadena, Texas, for you in July.

Around the edge of the mansion, and that was some distance away, a tall man all dressed in black, looking as cool as a polar bear, moved out across the lawn toward the detective. When he reached Slater he held out his hand, said, "I'm Mr. Savage's assistant, Jason Neely. Mr. Savage is expecting you."

"Raymond Slater," the big

detective said, and while they shook he took a good look at Jason. He was tall and bald with a face that might have been thirty or fifty years old. He had a thin nose and lips, sharp chin and blue eyes that could have been any color and looked the same, bored. Or maybe it was just indifferent.

The black suit he was wearing was not a uniform as Slater had thought originally, but it certainly gave that impression. Jason looked perfectly comfortable and correct in it, as natural as an English butler. His grey shirt and little black bow tie looked as unworn as if they had been on the department store manikin all day, and never once exposed to the humidity of July. There wasn't a drop of sweat on him.

"Please come with me," Jason said and he led Slater to the house, up a trio of steps as wide and white as marble tombstones, then inside to a wide blue-tiled hall.

"Wait here a moment, please," Jason said, "and I'll inform Mr. Savage that you have arrived."

Slater nodded and Jason went down the long hall and through a set of metal-banded doors that looked large enough and strong enough to protect a castle. Slater got out a cigarette, lit it, sat in an expensive lobby chair with an ornamental knee high ashtray by it and smoked.

After a while Jason came through the castle doors, walked over to the detective, said, "He'll see you now, but please don't let him overdo. He's a very sick man."

"I understand," Slater said, standing. "I'll just go on in."

"Surely," Jason said. "Meg will bring refreshments. Excuse me. I need to put the car away." They half-nodded at one another. Jason went outside and Slater went down the hall and through the huge doors.

It was very cool inside, almost uncomfortable. The carpet was as white as the peaks of the Himalayas and Slater thought whoever did the vacuuming must have a hell of a hard time. The curtains were white and so were the walls and so was Kerwin R. Savage.

The old man sat in a rattan chair on a mass of white cushions with a low, glass topped table at his right elbow. He looked very small and like a plantation owner without his broad-brimmed hat. He had milky white hair and he wore a white suit with white shirt and glossy white tie. Even his socks and shoes were white. His pale face and faded grey eyes were topped by bushy brows of snow. He looked very worn and, oddest of all, he was sweating. Even his hair looked damp.

Slater stepped over to the chair and took the hand Savage was offering. The old man shook weakly with his damp little paw,

rather like a dying rat giving one last shake before the trap did him in.

"Mr, Slater, of course," the old man wheezed. "I'm Kerwin R. Savage." He gave Slater a thin glimpse of his pearly dentures. Even his lips seemed white. "Hell of a name for a wimp like me, isn't it?"

Slater just smiled, thought maybe the old man had dressed up for his arrival and was obviously hot and uncomfortable, so he slipped off his battered sports jacket and draped it over his arm, said, "Hot day for a coat and tie of any kind."

"Proper breeding," Savage said, splitting his thin little smile, "has ruined my common sense, Mr. Slater. Actually, I never had proper breeding, just money." He waved Slater at a chair, added, "Drag it over close, son. My voice is weak enough. And put your jacket on. This room isn't fit for normal healthy folk."

Slater pulled his jacket on, picked up the chair with its white cushion, carried it over and sat it less than six feet from the old man.

"How do you like the decor?" Savage said. "I had it done in early Antarctica to help me feel cool and comfortable. It's like this damn body of mine, all screwed up."

Slater didn't say anything about the interior decoration. Savage slipped off his coat, draped it over the arm of his chair, loosened his shiny white tie and unbuttoned his shirt at the neck. He was perspiring like an Eskimo in the Congo.

"How can I be of service to you?" Slater asked.

Savage fished a handkerchief, white of course, from his draped coat and wiped his face and neck with it. "I want you to find my wife, Reba. Lieutenant Burney at police headquarters recommended you."

Savage went back to his jacket and this time he brought out a long brown wallet and removed a string of celluloid picture casings. He handed them to Slater.

All five pictures were of a beautiful woman with ebony hair and eyes to match. She had perfect teeth and a ripe mouth that said, "Kiss me," at the least. The body in two full-view photos was less subtle. She didn't look a day over twenty-five.

Savage said, "Young, isn't she? You're wondering what an old coot like me could do for a woman like that?"

"It *is* a bit unusual," Slater said, handing the pictures back.

"Keep them," Savage said. "You may need them."

Slater put the pictures in his coat pocket.

"I want to tell you right away," Savage said, "I have no illusions. None whatsoever. Reba married

me for my money. I knew that from the start, but I was lonely and sick. I love her and I want her back. Most of all I want her happy.

"What I'm saying so clumsily is this—Find her, find out what she's doing, if she's happy. If she doesn't want to come back, don't try and make her. I don't even care why she left, just that she's all right and doesn't need anything."

"You think she left on her own?" Slater asked.

"I think she may have. An old man like me, money or not, isn't a lot of fun. Socially or at home. The home part no amount of money can substitute for."

"Tell me everything about Reba that you believe is relevant," Slater asked. "Start with how long ago she disappeared."

"It'll be a week Tuesday," Savage said. "Sometimes she leaves and doesn't come back for a day. Boyfriends, I suppose. I don't blame her for that. But six days. That's a long time."

Just then a side door opened to the left and a young lass with black hair arranged like a southern belle entered with a silver tray. On the tray were two glasses and a beaded pitcher of yellow-white liquid with ice cubes tinkling within.

The woman wore a crisp white dress, simple but well tailored, with black trim about the hem and short sleeves. There was a black sash belt to go with that. The dress fell almost to her knees. She looked very prim and dependable and, except for her hot, wet, black eyes and long, sleek legs, just like a maid.

She sat the tray down on the table, poured the two glasses full, looked at Slater out of the corner of her eye, then more fully when she handed him his glass.

Savage took that in.

"Meg, this is Mr. Slater—Mr. Slater, this is Meg Bailey. I've employed Mr. Slater to do me a service. I'll be wanting you to show him around after a bit. I'm much too worn."

"Certainly," she said.

"You may go now," Savage said, and she did, but she looked back smiling and Slater smiled at her.

Savage said, "I could have one that was old and fat and far more experienced but what fun's in that. When you get my age scenery is very important. Anything pleasant is."

Slater laughed at that and took a swig of his drink. It was lemonade. The old man sipped his, picked up where he had left off.

"Last time I saw Reba was last Tuesday morning about eight. She was going to play tennis and swim at the club. She does that every Tuesday. It's an exclusive club called The Green Lawn. It's been in Pasadena less than a year. Big place for the rich,

a bit snobby, if I say so myself. It offers tennis, swimming, health bar, steam room and, when they're finished building, a golf course.

"The best I can remember she was wearing a red tank top, white-and-red tennis shorts and white tennis shoes. She had a racquet with her, of course, and a bathing suit and towel. I don't think anything was missing from her room. My maid looked and thought the same. Her car was at The Green Lawn the next day and she had a few things in her locker. I had Meg drive Jason over to pick up the car."

"What are the police doing about this?" Slater asked.

"They have more missing persons than they can shake a stick at. They hardly have time to chase down some old, rich coot's young, promiscuous wife. Lieutenant Burney said, if I wanted something done right away, I should see you. He said missing persons is your specialty.

"Besides, I'd rather not embarrass her if possible. The police can't afford that luxury. You see, Mr. Slater, there was a night club in Dallas I used to frequent. Reba had an act there. The place was called the Blue Derrick and her act went quite a bit beyond the floor show."

"Prostitute?"

"On the head. Our crowd beats about the bush on these things. You'd never make it in our group, Mr. Slater. Not even with money. Be glad as hell for that. Okay, I went to the club regularly to drink and to see Reba and, like I said before, I was lonely and she was friendly and had no particular distaste for money or a marriage of convenience."

"You're trying to tell me to play hush hush because you might be shown with a dirty nose?" Slater suggested.

"Not at all. I gave up giving a fat damn about the Yacht Club and the cocktail parties long ago. I'm in a rut and now I'm too old to crawl out with a step ladder. It's Reba I care about. She got to me for money, no guesswork there. She spends more in a week than you probably make in a month. I don't even try to keep count.

"I don't care where it goes or what for. Reba didn't come up with a silver spoon in her mouth and, if the truth be known, neither did I. I was lucky. I had a rich uncle who died and liked me. Reba had a whore for a mother and no father that she knew about. Maybe there's a sort of Oedipal note to be read into all of this. Can't say.

"Reba married me, and for the first time in her life she didn't have to scrape and show her flesh to make a living. I don't want her reminded of her past. Not at any cost. She may not love me, but I've given her a sort of respect. It's all she's got.

And now, knowing I've done that for her, it's all *I've* got.

"Petty business to a man like you," Savage concluded sitting his half-empty glass on the table, "but that's how I want it."

"I'll keep it quiet as I can," Slater said. "Jason and Meg know about all this?"

"Yes. Jason has been with me a long time and I trust Meg dearly. Son"—Savage drew out the word—"to tell the truth, I'm not a very good judge of character. I've been taken to the cleaners more times than a Clergyman's collar, but I trust you. I honestly believe you'll do your best to keep this whole thing as quiet as possible. Now, let's talk money."

"I brought along a contract," the detective said.

Slater took out the contract and pen, watched painfully as Savage's wet, clawlike hand scribbled with the ballpoint. When that was done, Savage leaned back on his cushions, crossed his hands in his lap. There were beads of sweat on his forehead and upper lip. He seemed too weary to use the handkerchief on them.

"Damn if I'm not all done in, son," Savage said. "I'd like to rest. You just go through that door," he lifted a bloodless finger in the direction Meg had made her exit, "on down that hall and you'll find Meg. She'll show you around. You look all and anywhere you like, son."

"thank you," Slater said and drained his glass. The clattering of the ice sounded as loud as a maraca in that sterile room. The detective put the glass on the table as he stood, said, "I'll do my best. You can count on that."

The old man's eyes were half closed. He whispered. "I am, son, I *am*." Then he closed his eyes completely and rested his chin on his chest.

Slater went out and closed the door softly.

II

MEG WAS OUTSIDE Reba's room, waiting.

Slater went up to her, said, "This is it?"

"Uh-huh." Meg opened the door and led Slater inside to a room that was definitely feminine, almost childlike. It had light blue walls and a big bed decorated with fluffy blue-and-green flowered pillows and a bedspread to match. There were several stuffed animals on a long shelf along with a few books, mostly astrology. From the looks of these, Slater determined Reba was a Libra.

Meg sat on the bed with her sleek legs crossed and watched with interest. That did very little for Slater's concentration, at least on the pertinent subject matter. He said, "You live in?"

"Uh-huh. Got my own room. *Verrry* private." She gave Slater a

wink that said she was just hamming it up.

"Uh-huh. Got my own room. *Verrry* private." She gave Glater a wink that said she was just hamming it up.

He smiled at her. "What do you think about all this?" Has Reba run off with some man?"

"Maybe," Meg said, but I don't think so. They have a strange relationship — platonic you might call it — but I think Reba loves him in her won way."

Slater nodded, made another round of the room, concluded that the outstanding thing about it was that its inhabitant had a somewhat childlike affinity for stuffed animals and pleasant surroundings. Nothing really odd in that.

After the room, Meg took Slater for a tour of the labyrinth that was the Savage estate. Nothing really caught his eye. Meg walked him to the door.

"How many employees besides yourself?" Slater asked.

"Three others. Two women who work at the same thing I do part time, and that's almost everything. One gardener — Jason — handles several jobs. He's incredibly efficient, if a bit boring."

"The others know about Mrs. Slater's disappearance?"

"I don't think so. If they ask about her, Jason and I just say she's on a trip. That's what Mr. Savage told us to tell them."

"Thank you," Slater said. They exchanged smiles. With that, the private detective went out to his steaming car and climbed inside. Meg, standing in the doorway, waved to him as he rolled out of the drive.

The luxurious Green Lawn Health Spa and Athletic Club lay on the outskirts of Pasadena and it smelled of money a block away. The oldest car Slater could see parked there was last year's model. Out back were several large tennis courts, and except for the players, they looked as if the builders had just cleaned up the place and the first net had gone up ten minutes ago.

The pool lay beyond that, large, blue and crowded with people. Behind it all lay several acres of red dirt sparsely patched with fresh planted grass and trees— the soon-to-be golf course. There was also a parked bulldozer out there.

Slater parked in front of a modern hunk of redwood, glass and several thousand dollars worth of architectural knowhow, got out and went inside. The interior was bright with pale green walls and blue plastic furniture. There was a man just to the left of Slater, sitting at a see-through plastic table.

He was wearing peroxide-blonde hair, beige slacks and a tight white tee-shirt that displayed a whole Charles Atlas course worth of muscles. He got up, flexing the Atlas course, and went over to the detective.

"Pardon me," the blond said, "but this is a private club, sir."

"Oh, I'm very private," Slater said.

The man's eyes went from brown to muddy.

"I'm thinking of joining," Slater added quickly. "Could I speak to whoever is in charge."

"I'm the manager."

"Is there someone over you, a superior."

The blonde nodded heavily. "Yes, but I assure you..."

"Thanks," Slater said, "but it's your superior I want to see."

"Very well," the blond said, rippling the muscles in his chest. "If you'll just sit down over there a moment." He nodded at the table where he had been sitting, then turned and walked stiffly toward the back.

Slater went to the table and sat down. Not long afterward a tall, slightly overweight but formidable-looking man, with a blue tee-shirt stretched tightly over a size fifty chest, came out with the peroxide blond and sat down across from Slater. The manager sat next to the burly detective.

The man in the blue tee-shirt had iron grey hair, black eyes, a boxer's nose and a silver-studded ring on his left middle finger that could have anchored a ship. He held out his ringless hand, said, "I'm Jasper Clewson, the owner.

"This"—he nodded at the scowling blond—"is my manager Anthony Kyd." Clewson and Slater shook. When it was Kyd's turn he tried to mix up the detective's knuckles.

"First of all," Slater said holding his injured paw against his thigh, "I've got to straighten one thing out. I'm not here to join. I'm Raymond Slater, a private detective."

Slater took out his license and passed it to Clewson, who in turn passed it to Kyd. After Kyd had made a more-than-thorough examination, he handed it to the detective.

Slater slipped it away and brought out the pictures of Reba Savage. He passed them in the same manner, said, "Know her?"

"Sure," Clewson said. "Reba Savage. Tomorrow's her day." Slater watched Kyd look at the pictures. His face was impassive, perhaps a bit too impassive.

"Her *day*?" Slater asked, feigning ignorance.

"She comes for her workouts on Tuesday," Clewson said. "Plays tennis, swims, saunas, that sort of thing."

"Have any regular tennis partners," Slater asked.

"Anyone available," Kyd snapped. "This is a *private* club. We don't pair folks two by two at the door, and we don't keep tabs on our members. They pay their money and do what they

like, as long as it's within the rules."

"I didn't ask what she did in the manager's office," Slater said.

Kyd half-rose out of his chair. Slater's voice held a chilled razor edge. "Sit down, muscles. I don't think you'd look so good on crutches."

"You *talk* tough," Kyd started, but Clewson reached up and clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"*Sit*," Clewson said gently. Kyd half-poised out of his chair for a moment, then, very slowly, sat down. His face was as red as a Hawaiian sunset.

Clewson gave Kyd a disparaging look, said to Slater, "My manager is a bit excitable. Overprotective of the members. If Mrs. Savage is missing we'll be glad to help. You asked about tennis partners. I don't see what bearing that has on anything, but here goes. Tony here was one of her partners from time to time. Then there's Marilyn Cunningham and a nut named Eric Stroheim."

"Nut?" Slater asked.

"Member of the Pasadena Nazi Party. Bunch of weirdos. Reba played with him from time to time, and maybe some games besides tennis."

Kyd's mouth fell open. He took a deep breath, pushed back his chair and stood. "Clewson, you sonofabitch, you can take this job and bounce it." With that, Kyd went out the way Slater had come in, doing his stiff walk.

"Now what the hell did I say?" Clewson growled.

Slater dug a notepad and pen out of his pocket, tossed them on the table, said, "I'm sorry about your manager. He's a hothead. Maybe something's riding him and he'll be asking for his job back when he cools off."

Clewson sat with a perplexed look on his face. "I certainly hope so."

"I hate to persist, but I'd be obliged if you'd write down the names and addresses of Stroheim and Cunningham."

Clewson sighed. "Yeah, sure. I'll have to go back to the office to get them. Be right back." He picked up the pad and pen, and went toward the rear.

Slater sat and thumped his fingers on the glass tabletop. Something was spinning around in his head like a roulette wheel, something important, something that had to stop eventually to show its colors.

When Clewson came back with the addresses, he said, "The Stroheim kid will probably be easy to find. He doesn't work. Parents foot his bill. Marilyn works nights at the Del Rio, some kind of singer. Late afternoon, before work, is probably your best bet with her."

Slater thanked him, tucked the addresses away and went outside, hoping his car hadn't

been towed away as a public nuisance.

Kyd was leaning on the driver's side of Slater's chevy, picking absently at his fingernails. Slater thought he had looked big inside. Out in the sober light of day he was Apollo and Hercules rolled up in a tight tee-shirt.

Slater sauntered over to him as if he was no more than a gutless fly on the windshield. The detective said, "You waiting for me?"

Kyd leaned away from the car. "Yeah," he said. "I want to apologize."

That caught Slater off guard. "What the hell for? I think maybe I lost you a job in there. *I* owe *you* the apology. I'm the one with the big mouth."

"Naw, you didn't cost me nothin'. I was a sap. I was sick and tired of the job anyway. Sick and tired of Reba, for that matter."

Slater didn't say anything, just got out his pack and lipped a cigarette but didn't light it.

"Clewson's a jerk," Kyd went on. "That stuff about Strohein is true enough, but after all the crap he's fed me about the customer's privacy, he's sure quick with the lip. Pays small potatoes anyway."

Slater said, "Uh-huh."

"See that big tree up there?" Kyd asked.

Slater walked over by him and looked. There were several big trees. He said, "Which one?"

"The oak, the biggest one out there, on the other side of the bulldozer."

"Uh-huh. I see it. What about it?"

"That's where I saw her last. That help any?"

Slater got out his folder of matches, peeled one off and lit his cigarette, took a short drag, said, "Reba, you mean."

"Yep, Reba. Damn good-looking broad."

"Howsabout you backtrack some for me."

Kyd turned to Slater. "Okay. Why not? I'm not working for nobody. I don't owe Clewson a cold drink. He didn't even try to keep his mouth shut.

"Last Tuesday, Reba came like always and we played tennis for a while. She always, no matter what, plays first with Marilyn. They don't spend fifteen minutes on the court, but they always play first. I don't see what fun's in a fifteen minute game, do you?"

Slater told him he didn't know a tennis racquet from a baseball bat.

"So Reba and Marilyn played, and then me and Reba and then she played Stroheim. Stroheim was always putting the hustle on that Savage chick and getting nowhere."

"And you?" Slater asked. "You always played it straight down the line, just a sports fan?"

Kyd smiled thinly. "Okay.

I hustled the chick, scored even. I knew she was married and that bothered me. I mean, I got scruples, but she didn't seem to think she was married. Said she married the old geezer for his money and he didn't have the stamina to even hug her hard, let alone sack up with her."

"This all leads to the tree!" Slater said pleasantly.

"Yeah. You see, last Tuesday Reba and I had this argument. I tried to set us up for the evening, but she was giving me these nutty excuses. Her hair needed washing, her nails needed doing, the old man wanted her around, that sort of stuff.

"A bit later she and Stroheim are batting the ball. I'm working, but part of my job was to watch the customers, play tennis and swim from time to time, that sort of thing. Anyway, I come out and see that Jerk Stroheim leaning on her, pawing at her.

"She starts to push and he keeps on, and to make it short, I get my big nose in and Stroheim tries to land a haymaker on me. I pushed him down on the court, skinned his knees, slapped him a couple of times. That's all there was to that."

"Somehow," Slater said, "the part about the tree bothers me. I keep trying to work it in."

Kyd chuckled. "I'm getting to that. This place closes at nine p.m. I stayed till ten to do some paperwork on new members. I don't drive a car to work. I live on the other side of the golf course, Northridge Apartments, and I jog over here every morning coming to work and every night going home. Health nut."

"So it was a pretty bright night, and I'm starting to head out, and I see these two walking up by the big tree over there. The dozer wasn't parked exactly where it is now. It was shadowy underneath that tree, but before they were completely beneath it I recognized the woman.

"I'd recognize that build anywhere. It was Reba, no doubt of it. The guy with her was in the shadows and he seemed to be dressed all in black. I figured it must have been Stroheim. Well, that made me mad as hell after all that stuff that afternoon; fending him off, me acting like a fool, and there they were under the tree, and when he started to reach out and paw her, I said what the hell and just turned and went on.

"This is probably about as important as what I had for breakfast, isn't it?"

"You never know," Slater said. the tree fits in."

"You tell a nice story," Slater said.

Kyd screwed up his face. "Meaning?"

"Meaning nothing," Slater said. "I think maybe you could get your job back if you really wanted it."

"*Nuts* to Clewson and his silly job. I'm tired of fat old hags who think I come with the place."

"What about young married ones?" Slater said, walking over to his car.

Kyd followed. "Them, too. I don't care if I never see Reba again."

Slater got in the red wreck, coughed the engine to life, said through the open window, "See you." He drove down the circular drive and back to smoggy Pasadena.

A LITTLE preliminary research in the form of Slater's pal Lt. Randle Burney at the Pasadena Police Station informed him that Eric Stroheim was a legal name change from Ted Louderdale. He'd been in a few minor scrapes with the police, but nothing serious, so far. Stroheim was, as Clewson had said, a member of Pasadena's growing Nazi party. He was also, according to Burney, very bored and very rich.

Slater called at his house, pretending to be a friend and his mommy dear, with whom he still lived, let him know that Teddy was out with friends at a little place called Adolf's. She gave Slater the address and the detective drove over there.

Adolf's was a burger stand converted to a club by the use of lots of paint and little taste. There were a '70 Dodge pickup parked out front, two motorcycles and a just-off-the-production-line Mercedes Benz. Slater presumed the Mercedes was rich Teddy's.

Three crudely painted signs, on and at either side of the door, told him the place inside was private. Slater opened the door and went into a reasonably cool bar laced with cigarette smoke, the clacking of pool balls and jukebox polka music.

A beefy, crewcut bartender sporting a Nazi uniform with a swastika arm band was sitting on a stool behind the bar, picking at his teeth with a shredded match. On the wall behind him was a three-dollar picture of dear old smiling Hitler bordered by a twenty-dollar picture frame.

None of the little round tables dotting the pace was occupied, but the two pool tables in the back had customers—a couple of men at each and one kibitzer. None of them was in uniform, but Slater the impression that they had left theirs at home on hangers.

The thing that was a bartender discarded his match on the floor and said, "Hey dumplin'. This ain't no regular joint. This here's a private club for the Pasadena Nazi Party. No membership, no admittance." He sounded about as German as Slim Pickens.

Slater walked over to the bar, got out a cigarette and managed to light it without his hand shaking, said, "That's the second time today I've heard that private hogwash and the first time was a lot

classier place than this outhouse. I'm liking the sound of that line less and less."

The bartender smiled, showed Slater some teeth that could have chewed an elephant's hind leg off. "Well, *well,*" he said easing off his stool to stand six-foot five worth of rock quarry. That reminded Slater that his .38 was in the glovebox of his wreck. Not that he would have been within his rights to use it,but it would have made him feel less like a worm that was about to be stepped on.

"I'm with the police," Slater said, "and I'm looking for Teddy Louderdale."

"Well, *well,*" the bartender repeated.

The fellows at the pool tables had stopped their play to listen, and now one of them stepped forward with a pool stick in his hand and, pointing it at Slater, said, "Fellow, I don't know who in hell you are, but I'd better not hear you call me by that name again. Police or not, that don't buy nothing from me."

Rock Quarry, the bartender, made a casual step in Slater's direction. Slater said evenly, "We can save ourselves a lot of grief if you'll just let me ask you a few questions, Stroheim, in private."

Stroheim, a large, but gangly youth with sidewalled blond hair and a mustache like a sick caterpillar about to drop off a limb, walked slowly toward Slater, still holding the pool stick. All the pool players at the tables had stopped playing pool and were holding their cues in an unprofessional manner, for pool. The kibitzer picked up a cueball and practiced his curve-ball grip on it.

Slater dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it slowly with his heel. He tried to keep an expression of bored disinterest on his face. Teddy was now within distance to strike a vicious blow. Up close, he looked more baby faced than Audie Murphy.

"Boy," Slater said, "I may not have made the best entrance that I could have, but I'm short on time. I'm looking for someone that I feel could be in big trouble. If you know something about it and I don't, *you* could be in big trouble. Got me?"

The bartender leaned over the bar, said, "Well, well."

Stroheim didn't say anything for a moment. His Adam's apple seemed to be trying to find a nice place to lie down. He worked the sick caterpillar with the tip of his tongue, licked the sweat off it. "All right," he said, "I'll talk at him."

The boys in the back relaxed. The bartender didn't bother to say well, well. He just sneered. Stroheim led the way to a table next to the wall, pulled out a chair and sat. Slater sat across from him, back to the wall.

"Make it quick," Stroheim said.

"I just want to know when you last saw Reba Savage. And do you know where she is?"

"Probably shacked up with somebody."

"You know from experience, I guess."

"Hell yeah."

"Manager at the Green Lawn says different."

"Just jealous 'cause he couldn't make the grade."

"You see her a lot then?"

"Any time I want. Any way I want."

Slater tried a long shot. "Ever want to see her dead?"

"What?" Stroheim blinked.

"She's dead. That missing business was jive. She's colder than a carp."

"Now wait just a doggone minute."

"Maybe a big stud like you takes her out and she says no go and you kill her."

Stroheim was sweating heavily now. "Hey. I ain't killed nobody."

"You *say*."

Suddenly, Stroheim let out a squeal of frustration and came out of his chair with a wild swing at the detective's head. Slater caught Stroheim's wrist, slid out of his chair simultaneously and jerked him across the table head-first into the wall. Stroheim's head sounded like a beaver's tail slapping water.

No sooner had Stroheim crumpled, unconscious against the wall, than Fritz, the rock quarry that walked like a man, flew out from behind the bar with a longneck in hand.

Slater stepped directly into the huge goon, ducked beneath his downward swing with the bottle and blocked the striking arm with a glancing edge of the hand blow that sent the bottle flipping from the assailant's grasp.

He threw a hard right into the man's solar plexus and bent him, then, with both hands, grabbed him by the back of the neck and brought him down into his updriving knee. Fritz went back amidst a spurt of blood and flying molars.

Then the others were on him.

Instinctively, Slater spun, threw up his hands in a defensive position.

The closest attacker swung his pool stick at the big detective's head. Slater ducked. The stick whizzed by close enough to lift his hair. When the cue-wielding Nazi started with the backhand swing, Slater slid, catlike, toward him, in close where the power of his blow would be weakest, he took some of the stick in the ribs, sent a right uppercut between the man's arms and clipped his chin hard enough to lift him a couple inches off the floor.

No sooner had that Nazi bit the dust, then Slater felt the lash like sting of a cracking cue across his broad back. Ignoring

the pain, he bent forward and grabbed the stick his recent assailant had dropped. He turned and lashed out blindly, struck no one, but forced the three remaining to fall back.

One of the Nazis, the one that had struck Slater across the back, held a jagged piece of cue in his hand. To his left, another held a whole cue. The third guy was the one with the cueball. He was bouncing it up and down in his paw.

Slater backed toward the door, waving the stick before him. The one with the cue ball yelled, "*Get* him!" and then there was a white, expanding blur before the detective's eyes. He leaned just enough for the cueball to miss, slam into the door sill behind him and bounce all the way back to the tables.

The goons rushed.

Slater tossd the stick just right. It caught between the foremost attacker's legs and tripped him. He went sprawling in the path of the other two.

Slater wheled, jerked the door open and sprinted for his car. He snagged the .38 out of the glovebox only seconds before they were on him. The sliding of their heels churned up gravel. The one that had thrown the cue ball said, "Now wait a minute, pal. That gun makes things permanent."

"Yeah," the hard-breathing detective said, "and that cueball would have just bounced off my noggin and we could have had a few laughs together later, while we were picking up what was left of my nose." Slater cocked back the hammer on the .38. "Back inside, scum."

They went back inside and closed the door. Slater thought he heard a key turn even from where he stood.

With his back screaming for help, he climbed in behind the wheel, tossed the .38 on the seat and steered for home, hunched over the steering column like Quasimodo.

After a couple of hours in a tub of hot water and Epsom Salts, the pain in his back had slackened to the point that he could dry off with a very soft towel, very gingerly. He managed to swab some iodine on the wound and a wraparound body bandage without having to grow a third arm. He dressed in an old cotton workshirt, blue cordoroy pants and white tennis shoes without socks. After that, he treated himself to a beer and a few stale pretzels.

He was enjoying an after-snack cancer stick when the phone rang. It was Meg Bailey.

"I'm calling for Mr. Savage," she explained. He's gotten worse, much so."

"How worse?"

"He's checking into the hospital right now. Jason drove him. Mr. Savage insisted that I let

you know and tell you to call him at the hospital—his room—the minute you know anything about Reba."

"Tell him he can rest assured," Slater said. "I'll find her and he'll know the instant I do. What's the room and phone number there?"

She told him; said softly, "I don't think he's going to make it this time. He's trying to be a tough old soldier, but I don't think he's gonna make it. If it weren't for Reba, his waiting, wanting to hear from her, he'd be already gone."

"Don't count the old bird out yet," Slater said and they made their goodbyes.

Slater groaned off the couch, checked his watch. Quarter to four. Enough time to get over and check on Marilyn Cunningham before she went to work at the Del Rio in downtown Houston.

IT WAS a nice house of pink brick but not the sort Slater imagined the average Green Lawn member owned. That place took bread, and not the sort with yeast.

The detective parked at the curb, went up and pushed the doorbell. A long silence went on behind the door. He pushed the bell again. More of the same nothing.

Slater went around to the garage and looked through the little windows there. Last year's economy Chevy was taking a nap inside. He went back to the door and tried the bell again. No dice. He tried the knob. It wasn't locked.

Accidentally-on-purpose, the big detective twisted the knob, and accidentally-on-purpose he slipped inside. He called a few times and got no answer. He made a few light steps through the living room and into the kitchen, called again. He was alone with his voice.

Looking around the kitchen, he found a few unwashed plates and two glasses in the sink. He picked the glasses up and sniffed. Someone had had a drink of whisky not long ago. The plates smelled of lemon and fish.

He went into the bedroom and found her.

She wore only her long blonde hair. She lay halfway on the fluffy green bedroom carpet and halfway on the blue tile of the bathroom. Her hair fanned around her head and onto the bathroom tile like the golden sun slowly sinking into the sea.

Slater went over to her and touched her neck for a pulse. You could have chilled drinks with her flesh.

Pulling back her hair—the part that wasn't glued to her face by drying blood—he found what had done her in. She had a nasty wound on her right temple. Her right eye was bulged from the

socket—the blow on the head had done that. It had been a good solid lick.

Slater got up and checked the room. Her robe and undergarments were folded neatly on the chair. The covers on her bed were thrown back. Nobody was under it or hiding in the closet with a tire iron.

He went into the kitchen and made a couple of phone calls. The last one was to the police.

Lt. Burney said, "You should take up being a free lance mortician, Ray. It seems more your line of work. Everytime I see you it's over a dead body. 'Cept when you're tryng to con me into some kind of fool deal."

"Without me," Slater said, "you'd have half the business."

"And twice the rest."

Slater covered a yawn with the back of his hand, put a heel on Burney's desk, a position he had taken a half dozen times in the last two hours. "You about through with me, Burn. I've told you ten times how I came to find the body."

"Uh-huh," Burney said, pushing at Slater's foot with the toe of his shoe. "And about ten times you haven't told me who your client is? How do Stroheim and Marilyn tie in with you? What are you up to?"

"I'd rather not say," Slater said moving his foot so that Burney couldn't kick it.

"Get your damn heel off my desk," Burney said.

"You got yours there," Slater said.

"It's *my* desk. Any ideas about the murder?"

"Same ones you got," Slater said, inspecting a hangnail.

"You don't think she was raped either, do you, Ray?"

Slater put his other heal with its companion. "No. The coroner told you she had had sexual intercourse recently, that much he could tell right off. He didn't say she had been raped."

"He hasn't had time for a thorough examination," Burney reminded Slater.

"Uh-huh," Slater replied. "But he won't find she's been raped. The robe and the underclothes were all folded neatly on a chair next to the bed, for one. I'd say that's odd."

"So she got attacked by a tidy rapist," Burney said.

"Maybe. There were two glasses in the sink. They had the smell of whiskey. There were also two plates, unwashed."

"So? I've got a setup like that at home."

"I called the Del Rio right before I called you. I pretended to be a cousin from out of town trying to find Marilyn. They told me she had asked for the night off and that she was home."

"I know," Burn said. "I checked that out myself. What you're saying is she had planned the afternoon and maybe the night."

"Yep. I think after they spent their time in the sack, they had an argument. She made a break for it, probably to lock herself in the bathrom, he caught her and crowned her with something. By the way. What's the coroner say about that?"

"He doesn't say anything. Just that she was killed by that blow, that it was probably something heavy."

"A fist maybe?"

"Heavier, he thinks. Something round and smooth. That's guesswork, but he's pretty damn good at it," Burney said.

Slater lit up a cigaret, took the feet Burney resented off the desk, said, "Maybe I could help you out, Burn."

Burney sighed, leaned back in his chair and held himself in place with his heels. He took a slightly bent cigar out of his coat pocket and put it in his mouth. He dragged a wooden match across his desktop, lit it, puffed, said, "Help me? Sure, Ray. I'll believe that when I see it."

"Say you let me look at the info you guys have dug up on Marilyn in the last two hours."

"Against the rules."

Slater frowned at him. "You've done it before."

"Against my better judgment," Burney said, scowling. Then, "Oh hell—*here*." Burney swung his feet on the floor, picked a manila folder off his desk and handed it to the detective.

What Slater read was little more than three sold paragraphs and only one thing caught his eye. Marilyn Cunningham had worked as a waitress, in Dallas, at The Blue Derrick.

Slater kept his wooden Indian face and handed the folder back to Burney. "No help there," he said. "Guess maybe I'll be going now. That is all right, isn't it?"

Burney took the cigar out of his mouth and spit a bit of tobacco off his tongue. "Ray," he said, "you wouldn't be holding out something would you?"

"Burn," Slater said sadly, "have I ever done that?"

Burney puffed up a big blue-grey plume of smoke, said, "Yep. Believe you have."

Slater got up and went to the door.

Burney said, "Of course, you'll let me know all about it the minute it's too late."

"Of *course*," Slater said, and went out.

Out in the parking lot, Slater checked his watch beneath a bug-swarmed pole lamp. Eight thirty-two. The night was young. He got in his heap and drove home to get a couple of shovels, then went over to the Northridge Apartments. Something was trying to burrow its way out of his subconcious, and maybe, just maybe, thought Slater, he had a grasp on it now.

It was a nice place. Slater got

the room number from the night manager, climbed up the stairs and knocked.

Anthony Kyd had his shirt off when he answered the door. He wore grey sweat-pants and jogging shoes. He looked like Tarzan about to try out for the track team. In the background, sitting on the couch, was a girl with long, red hair. She wore only a short nightie. She didn't seem concerned about that. She smiled at Slater before Kyd had time to step outside on the landing and close the door behind him.

"Your mother visiting?" Slater asked.

"How would you like to go downstairs over the rail, gumshoe? You better not have come up here to just to crack wise."

"Get your job back?"

"Wha—no. Totally disconnected with the place."

"That's handy," Slater said.

"You trying out lines and riddles, or are you here for a reason?"

"Get dressed," Slater said. "We're on our way to the golf course."

"Oh, I see. Just passing this way and you happened to have your clubs in the car. That *does* it. I'm bending you."

"That wasn't a smart remark," Slater said quickly. "I *meant* it. We're going to the golf course. I want you to get dressed now. It's me or the police."

"I don't think I follow you," Kyd said.

"You will. Come *on*."

"I got a *date*, man."

"Put her on hold, Kyd."

Kyd looked at Slater for a long moment. Shadows clouded his face, hid his expression. He wiped his palms on his sweatpants. "All right. Give me fifteen minutes to get dressed."

It took Kyd more like 25 minutes and Slater didn't think that he spent all that time pulling on his pants. When Kyd got in he said, "This had better be good."

"It won't be nearly as good as what you just had," Slater said and started up the engine.

The golf course clay was the color of blood in the moonlight. The huge oak seemed eerie and unreal. A gentle breeze moved its limbs in a manner that made them seem to clutch at the night like a dying man.

Slater parked, got the flashlight and two shovels out fo the trunk, gave one of them to Kyd. Kyd said, "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," Slater said. "Let's go on up to the oak."

Shadow lay thick beneath the oak and Slater used the light to check around for a spot that looked as if it might have been dug recently, at least a week ago.

He probed a few places with the shovel, skipped over those where a few anemic patches of grass grew.

Kyd said, "Exactly what is it you're looking for?"

"A place fresh dug with a bulldozer and covered."

"The contractors haven't been here in weeks, not since that hellish rain."

Slater felt a knot in his stomach. "*Stupid* of me!" he said. "A key. No way in the world you or Clewson could have a key for that thing?"

"Of course not but.."

"But *what*?"

"Well, if it matters, there's a key beneath the seat in a magnetic box." Kyd went over to the dozer, climbed up on it and pulled out the little container. "Got to visiting with the dozer operator one day. Saw him put the key there."

Slater said, "Can you drive that thing?"

"Can a duck tread water?"

"Back it off ten feet and kill it. I got an idea."

"Can't see any reason for that," Kyd said, but all right." He got the dozer cooking, backed it off about ten feet.

When Kyd climbed down, Slater told him to pick up a shovel and help. They started digging directly where the dozer had stood. Fifteen minutes later they found a long something protruding from the muck. It seemed to point to the stars. Flesh had already begun to peel from the bone, insects had been at work. A slaughterhouse odor floated on the night wind. It was a human finger. Kyd stumbled back, "*Oh Christ!*"

Slater took his shovel and began to scrape until he uncovered the once-beautiful face of Reba Savage. He covered his nose with his handkerchief to wipe the clay from her face. Part of what appeared to be clay was dried blood. The right side of her head was smashed. The method of death was familiar.

"How long," Kyd gasped, "has she been there?"

Slater stood up. "Say last Tuesday, shortly after you saw her and the man in black."

Kyd tightened his grip on the shovel. He dropped the light. "You think I did it, don't you?"

"I didn't say that," Slater said.

"But you're *thinking* it."

"I'm thinking you're making a damn fool of yourself. If you're innocent, what are you so excited about? Put down that damn shovel before I dig your liver out with it." Slater kept his hand on his shovel in what appeared a loose unconcerned grip, but he was ready to swing it if need be.

After a moment of consideration Kyd threw down the shovel. "Christ!" he moaned. "It looks bad for me."

"That it does," Slater agreed, "but I don't believe you did it. I know someone who can help us find the killer, pronto."

Slater could almost hear Kyd's heart pounding, "Who? *Who* can help me?"

"Come on," Slater said, throwing down his shovel. "We'll get

over there right now, and I'll need your help."

V

THE RAIN HAD arrived suddenly and by the time Slater pulled up at Clewson's house it was in full blow.

Slater thought, looking at Clewson's place, *Old man Savage can put this house in his garage, but Clewson can put my place in his living room.*

There were no lights. Slater checked his watch — 12:26.

Kyd said, "I couldn't remember if it was this street or the next."

"No matter," the detective said. "You got us here."

They got out of the car and splashed their way up to Clewson's front porch, rang the bell. After awhile lights went on and a voice behind the door said groggily, "Stand in front of the peephole so I can see who it is."

Kyd did that, said, "It's me, Clewson, Tony."

The door opened. Clewson in dark robe and slippers said, "Get in before you drown."

Slater and Kyd went inside and Clewson closed out the wet chill of the rain. Slater said, "We found Reba. She's dead, buried at The Green Lawn."

"Some kind of joke," Clewson said.

"No joke," Tony said. "Slater's got an idea who did it. I'm in a tight spot. I had a quarrel with Reba and one with Stroheim. It could be interpreted as a jealousy fight. I need help."

"Sure. But what can *I* do?"

Tony turned to Slater. Slater dug his pad and pen out of his damp shirt pocket, handed them to Clewson, said, "I want you to write down the very date that Eric Stroheim started at your club."

Clewson gave Slater a puzzled look. "What difference does that make? How can that help anything?"

"Just write," Slater said. "I guarantee an explanation."

"All right," Clewson said. He rested the pad in the palm of his right hand, and with his heavy ringed left began to scrawl.

Slater said, "You even wear that big ring to bed?"

Clewson looked up. "Huh?"

Slater hit him. It was a hard punch and the burly detective put every bit of his weight into it. The shoulder rolled, the hips turned and Slater's big scarred knuckles connected with Clewson's chin like a slaughterhouse hammer. The pad and pen went up in a flurry and Clewson went off his feet as if they had been jerked out from beneath him by a tripwire.

Clewson hit the carpet on his buttocks, slid, rolled to the left *and got up!*

Slater said, "Oh *hell!*"

Kyd said, "What the —"

Clewson lunged at the detective and even as Slater began to lash

out with a hard front snap-kick, Clewson suddenly seemed to dangle in mid-air and start back for the floor.

Kyd's hand had shot out like a badger and nabbed Clewson by the neck of his robe. As he fell for the floor, Kyd followed him down and slammed a hard right into his face. He pressed a knee across the fallen man's mid-section and clipped him another triphammer right that sent him out.

"You just got yourself a killer, Tony," Slater said.

Kyd blew out a long breath, looked up at Slater. "I hope like hell you know what you're talking about."

"I *know*," Slater said. "You done good. Call the cops while I tie this cookie up with his robe belt."

They sat in Homicide Detective Lt. Burney's office — Slater, Burney and Kyd.

Tony Kyd said, "Clewson's confessed, but I still don't see how you put it all together. You said the pad and pen trick was to check and see if he was left handed. What did that have to do with anything?"

Burney lit up a cigarette. "Shouldn't ask the bastard that," he said. "He loves to gloat and show me how big a snoop he is." Burney blew out some smoke, looked at Slater's grinning face. "Get the hell on and tell us, Sherlock."

Slater got out his cigarettes, lit one, put a heel on Burney's desk, rocked back in his chair.

"First of all, I missed out on the most important clue right from the first, at least consciously. My subconscious stored it away and it eventually surfaced. If I could have pulled it out earlier I might have saved Marilyn's life."

"When I first met Clewson, he said something to the effect that 'if Mrs. Savage is missing we'll be glad to help.' I never said she was missing. I just asked if he knew her. I should have caught that immediately, but I'm afraid your animosity was distracting me, Tony."

"Sorry," Tony said.

"All right. You were just trying to keep a tight lip on the Green Lawn's members. I can sympathize with that. Another thing was Clewson's capsule histories of Stroheim and Marilyn. He was trying to throw me off the track. He also tried to make you look suspect and to be perfectly honest, he did a damn good job.

"He painted Stroheim as the nut he really was and threw suspicion that way. When it came to Marilyn, who is at the bottom of all this, he was careful to let me know she worked nights and slept during the day and that Stroheim was free all the time."

"He thought, as long as I was just making with the routine questioning, that this would distract me from Marilyn for a while

and I'd see Stroheim first. That would give him a chance to get to Marilyn."

"He killed Marilyn?" Tony asked.

"It's in the confession," Burney said.

"But why *her*?" Tony said. "And how is she at the bottom of all this?"

"I know the answer to that. I've read the confession, but Slater hasn't. How about that one, Sherlock?" Burney said, grinning.

"Okay," Slater said. "I learned from you, Burn, that Reba and Marilyn had worked together at a place in Dallas called The Blue Derrick. Marilyn was a waitress and she knew what Reba's job was. Anyway, Marilyn liked money but didn't make much as a singer, and since she knew Reba before her marriage to Savage, knew what she was. She threatened to reveal Reba's past to the newspapers and make a big scandal. I prefer to think Reba paid off to keep the old man from getting hurt instead of herself. If she'd known the old man would have loved her if she'd run through the streets of downtown Houston naked, this all might not have happened.

"On the other side of the coin, maybe she was just covering for herself. Reba had access to all the money she wanted. It wasn't beans to Savage how much she spent, and those trips to The Green Lawn were for payoffs to Marilyn, not tennis."

"That's why the short games," Tony said.

"Uh-huh," Slater said. "Marilyn had to have known Clewson better than it appeared. Maybe they were keeping their relationship quiet so that the blackmail wouldn't be traced to Clewson and The Green Lawn."

"What you're saying," Tony said, "is that Marilyn and Clewson had a racket going."

"Yep. Clewson and her must have got together. He found out about Marilyn knowing Reba from The Blue Derrick, played up to Marilyn and cut himself in on the action. It had to be that way. When I found Marilyn's body it was apparent that she'd had company, and since she'd taken the night off from work, she and Clewson had expected to make a holiday out of it.

"What Clewson really wanted was to go over there and explain that I was on her tail and not to get nervous and spill the beans. She must have panicked and decided to deal herself out, but Clewson, being cautious, dealt her out. He grabbed her and slammed her with his fist.

"That's why I was checking to see if he was left handed. Both death blows for Reba and Marilyn were on their right temples, and both were delivered by a heavy object. With those big arms of his, Clewson could swing a mean blow. With that massive

ring he had a perfect murder weapon."

"Well I'll be damned!" Tony said. "Then that was Clewson I saw with Reba that night."

"Right. I figure Reba decided there was no end to the mess and told Marilyn to do her worst. Clewson, aware of Reba's loose reputation, made a false play for her and lured her to the oak. He must have revealed he was in on the blackmail business and that he could make it a damn sight hotter than Marilyn had promised. Reba called his bluff and he killed her."

"What about the bulldozer? How'd you know about that?"

"Partly hunch. And part of it was a misconception that just worked out. It never even occurred to me to consider the contractors. I was looking through a knothole. You said the bulldozer wasn't in the same spot when you saw the pair beneath the oak. It never occurred to me that the contractors might not have the key."

"That was just pure stupidity on my part, and luck that you knew about the key. Once I discovered you did, it seemed logical that Clewson might have found out about it in the same way, and taken advantage of it to dispose of the body. He forgot to consider that someone might notice the dozer had been moved a bit."

"And why did you drag me out there tonight?" Tony asked.

"One, I'm a gregarious gravedigger. Two, If I was right about the body. I was going to need some directions to Clewson's place. Three, you're bigger than he is."

"You're not exactly a midget," Tony said.

"If that's all," Burney said, "you may tip your deerstalker and depart.'

"That's all," Slater said.

Dead tired, Slater was about to drop into bed when the phone rang. It was Meg.

"Ray, I've been trying to get you for an hour. Mr. Savage has taken a drastic turn for the worse. Have you found out anything? He keeps asking."

"I found out things all right."

"I'm at the hospital right now with Jason. Can you get over here right away."

"I'm on my way," Slater said.

Meg and Jason met Slater at the elevator, walked with him to Savage's room. A lean, mustached doctor was coming out, along with a worn looking, young nurse when they got there.

Meg said, "How is he?"

"Not good." The doctor's voice was professional but kind. "I don't give him an hour. I don't see how he's hung on this long."

"He's waiting for the word," Slater said.

"What's that?" the doctor asked.

"Nothing," Slater said. "May we see him?"

The doctor nodded. "And if

he has any next of kin, you might notify them."

"We're it," Jason said solemnly.

Slater took Meg by the arm and the trio went into the room, closed the door behind them.

The old man in his white hospital pajamas with his equally pale face lying against white sheets looked as lifeless as a china doll. The tubes that seemed to stick out of him everywhere gave the appearance of a collapsed marionette. They went over and stood by the bed and Meg leaned over and managed to kiss Savage on the cheek without disconnecting anything.

The old man smiled briefly, dentureless, said, "Reba?"

"I've got word," Slater said.

Savage swallowed with difficulty. "My head," he said. "Raise it, please."

Jason reached through the tubes and wires, got a pillow doubled and positioned under Savage's head.

Savage said, "Not that it really matters anymore, but I'd like to see Mr. Slater alone for a moment."

Meg patted Savage's hand. Then, with Jason holding her arm, they went out of the room.

"I found her," Slater said. "She's doing fine and she's coming home. She's on her way to see you right now."

Savage cracked his mouth in a dry grin. "Thank you. But try again. You don't lie to a dying man so well."

"Very well," Slater said and pulled a chair over and sat down close to Savage's face and held his hand. It was as thin and fragile as tissue paper. "She's not coming home. A guy and a gal tried to blackmail her. They knew about the Derrick and they threatened to embarrass you if she didn't pay them off.

"She's been paying them for a while. I found out, told her you didn't give a damn. I got her to understand. Now here's the hard part — she's not coming back. Says she's no good for you and all she'll do is cause you trouble. She loves you too much for that.

"She's going to play it straight down the line from now on. She's gone and she didn't tell me where and she said she wouldn't. That's the thick and thin of it."

Slater leaned back in his chair and tried to look sad instead of like a liar. There was no way in hell he could tell Savage that Reba was gone forever.

Savage smiled and for the first time his eyes eemed to have fire. He said, "That's good, son. It's the best an old man like me could ask for. You did a fine job." Then he turned his head away from the detective, closed his eyes and coughed spittle onto his lips.

After a moment, Slater stood up, went quietly to the door and closed it softly behind him as if the old man were merely sleeping.

Licensed to Die

by JACK LEAVITT

Wylie Went to the TV Party to Gloat. He Had No Intention of Dying over a Drink.

AT THE KRKN-TV traffic board, near the chilled shrimp, Reuben Conrad leaned against a hand-lettered sign that read *We Made It! 13 Weeks On The Air!* Tall, small-boned and paunchier than he liked to admit, he wore a blue sports jacket and gray slacks, permanent-press clothing that always needed ironing.

He had been expecting the station staff, including himself, to be fired the moment the accountants' red ink blotched the owners' hopes of early profit. But the office party proved him wrong.

Toasting his error, he sipped his Scotch-with-a-splash and enjoyed the celebrant noises around him. As the literary commentator for Channel 22, specializing in book reviews and author interviews, he let the festivities stimulate program ideas.

From behind him, someone guffawed, a man's laugh pitched to impress a story-telling woman. "Right from my next show," Reuben thought. "*Curiosities of the Bible.* Plum Pudding Press. $8.95. Who was it, dear audience, who neighed after his neighbor's wife? *Everybody in Jerusalem,* that's who. Jeremiah 5:8: 'They were as fed horses in the morning; everyone neighed after his neighbor's wife.' Noisy lust, you see, sparks of our religious heritage."

Reuben smiled. Surely the reference would be acceptable. Perhaps "romance" instead of "lust." Even so, he had better check it beforehand with Dr. George Massengale, Channel 22's religious editor. No sense offending people unless that's the plan.

Reuben glanced around the room for his clerical colleague. Within sight of a drawbridge that spanned a small estuary, the office looked festive. Bright paper tablecloths covered the desks, with food and flowers garnishing the display. Liquor

and mixes stood on the promotion department desk, an area dominated by Arnold Owen, the station's owner-general manager.

George Massengale was nowhere in sight but Arnold Owen was barraging half-a-dozen thirsty staffers with stories they felt bound to hear, at least until they filled their plastic cups or took jobs with another boss.

Red-faced and wheezing, Arnold began laughing at his own jokes long before he reached the punch line. If Reuben hadn't heard from the assistant general manager that Arnold had been frightened for days, he would have guessed Arnold was having the best and most boisterous time of his television career.

Through the crowd shouldered a cameraman hauling portable minicam equipment. Monitors around the room picked up his candid shots, multiplying images, reducing dimensions. The partygoers could watch themselves.

"Then the scrawny teller, see, turns to the bank robber and yells, 'Hey, look, if you're taking the money, take the books, too. You're not the first pirate to dip into the till.'"

Arnold Owen laughed loudest at his own story. Tears of delight so filled his eyes that he pulled off his steel-rimmed eyeglasses to wipe them dry.

"Perfectly true," Reuben nodded to himself. "We still keep neighing along."

As the cameraman's temporary target, Reuben appeared in a head-and-shoulders shot on all the monitor screens, an observer observed. His headshake caught Arnold's eye.

"Funny, eh, Reuben?"

"That teller. Why'd he yell? Nobody shouts to keep a secret."

"Oh, Reuben, say it was funny," urged a dark-eyed, dark-haired woman who glided next to him. Sherry Stanton, the station's assistant general manager, had mastered the art of speaking while appearing only to smile.

"But funny, Arnold, funny."

The cameraman switched focus to an engineer, who couldn't quite reach a lemon wedge under his ice cubes, and attention skipped away from Reuben. Only Sherry hovered close.

"For a smart guy, Reuben Conrad, you don't know when to make life easy for Arnold."

"I'm drinking as fast as I can." Ice cubes clinked.

"He's laughing because he's scared. That license fight with old Wylie of Channel 51 has him worried sick."

Reuben took Sherry's arm and led her toward the window, where he pointed at the blue-green inlet that ran just beyond the concrete walkway. A low wall, pilings and planks, kept the pedestrians from the water.

"The sea," Reuben intoned. "Mother of us all. Including

our enemy R.E. Wylie, Lord of the Aforesaid Channel 51. He was standing right behind you."

"*Wow!* I didn't see him." Sherry blushed. Her red face clashed with her pink blouse.

"He didn't hear you."

"Who cares if he did! He's a pincher. Someday I'm going to slap his face."

Reuben grinned, faked a pinch and ducked.

"Harmless types don't bother me," Sherry grinned back. "But Wylie's here to make trouble. He and Arnold are ready to kill each other."

"License fight still going on?"

"Tooth and nail." Sherry plucked some lint from Reuben's shoulder. "Reuben, my dusty star, we don't make money on our public service shows. Your book reviews, Dr. Massengale's religious homilies, Collin Dunnett's interviews with industrial leaders — what do they all mean?"

A long reach snagged a handful of potato chips for Reuben. "Two thousand calories whenever we have an office party?"

Breaking off the end of a single chip, Sherry munched it slowly. "Not sinful enough for something so fattening. But our public service shows are 80% of our programming. And they're only 5% of the viewing market. What we need is approval for a scrambler pay-as-you-watch system. The last remaining ticket for the Bay Area. If we get that pay-TV license, we can thrive."

"With socko shows and bango sports, we'll all be rich," Reuben sighed.

"Without them we'll go—*glopp!*—down the drain. I wish I knew Wylie's angle."

"Nasty?"

Sherry closed her eyes. "Twice now, I've heard Arnold arguing with him on the phone. That damned Wylie won't say what it is. He's got a fuse lighted for the F.C.C. licensing board."

"Couldn't be about me, Sherry dear. I've led a blameless life," Reuben said — then gulped as a large, orange-faced man clapped him on the back.

"Most beauties are gorgeous, Collin."

"— This *exceptionally* gorgeous beauty out of circulation. My dear" — Collin kissed Sherry warmly—"you're withering away in this desolate corner, pining for romance and surrounded by potato chips."

"Be careful, Collin. You're getting tangerine makeup all over the woman I love."

"Hazard of the trade, my boy. If I were a mattress stuffer. . ."

Sherry interrupted with a twinkle. "Collin, what I saw of your interview upstairs with the artichoke farmer was great. You get a good tape?"

"Not bad for me. Fabulous for anyone else. Do you know how

many leaves the average artichoke has? I wish we could afford retakes."

"When the pay-TV license comes through."

"It better."

They stared across the room at their adversary. R.E. Wylie looked well fed but hungry. Engrossed in conversation with newscaster Bea Timmons, he was of medium height and slightly overweight, radiating intensity. Bea, a warm-hearted blonde with a marvelous speaking voice and simple thoughts, treated his nose like a camera lens and never took her eyes away from his nostrils.

Wylie faced the trio who were inspecting him. He patted Bea on the rump and led her to the group at the window.

"Ah!" He smirked. "The unemployment line. *Oops*—I forgot. That's not till next week, after the licensing board meeting."

A boat bell sounded from the estuary, followed by the siren wail of the rising drawbridge.

"Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell,"'Reuben quoted. "You wouldn't understand, Mr. Wylie. Your viewers don't read books."

"They watch television. That's what I care about."

"I don't know," Bea said. Her voice—low, exotic—might have been describing the incomprehensibility of the Eleusinian Mysteries. "We should learn to respect each other."

The television monitors displayed a long shot of the window group, too far away for clear sound pick-up. Sunlight burning into the camera from the window background forced a quick scene change, but not before Arnold Owen noticed the group's abrasive expressions.

"Consorting with the enemy?" Arnold chortled. Flashes of light sparked from his eyeglasses, making it difficult to look directly at him.

"Mentioning no names," Wylie baited Arnold as he stroked Bea's hair, "a few of your people actually like being on Channel 22. That's the advantage of working for a station where nobody checks for refrences too closely. They'd never make it past my elevator operator."

"Dear Lord Wylie" — Reuben acted as spokesman — "on Channel 22 you'd be lucky to *be* the elevator operator."

"You idiot..." Wylie began.

"*Enough!*" Arnold whipped off his eyeglasses and put them down angrily. "We're having a party."

Wylie sneered. "Enjoy it. Soon you can have the wake for Channel 22." Fists clenched, eyes slitted, he glared at his host.

Into the frozen silence walked a white-haired, smooth-skinned man, prepared for universal

benedictions. Dr. George Massengale, Channel 22's religious editor. His photogenic virtues, sonorous voice and charmingly ostentatious phrasing helped him to be a comforting video presence across denominational barriers. Star-bright, his sapphire ring glistened on his upraised right hand.

"Must we quarrel on so congenial on occasion? Surely we can beat our swords into more mundane instruments — like higher Neilsen ratings."

"I agree with you completely," Bea added. She tossed her hair back into place and explained her philosophy. "With so much heartbreak in the news, I think it's nice for people in the same profession to relax together."

Collin sandwiched Bea's hand between his own. "There are depths to you I've never realized, Beatrice." He waited for her to pull away but she remained tranquil.

"You're not drinking, Dr. Massengale,"Sherry said. "May I get you something?"

"Holy water?" suggested Reuben.

"Nothing here would be right for the reverend doctor," Wylie broke in. His leer encompassed them all. "Pure men need pure refreshment."

Anxiously, Arnold volunteered. "In my office, Dr. Massengale, I've got distilled water. Would that..."

Dr. Massengale shook his head, a considerate, appreciative refusal. "Please don't make a fuss. Remember, it's not the scientific distillation which makes water holy. It's the prayers that render it free of impurities. Plain tap water, with nothing added except a blessing. Besides I do, now and then, enjoy a glass of wine."

"For thy stomach's sake?" asked Reuben. He looked doubtful.

"Surely you understand, Reuben, that I'm no better than any of you. Don't you realize that a man can walk righteously and still be a sinner at heart?"

Circling his index finger above his head — a mock halo — Wylie announced, "I almost wish I hired Heaven for Channel 51. *Thou shalt use deoderant.*"

"Look, Wylie," Arnold grew flustered. "Stop insulting everybody. You're a damned pain when.."

Wylie smiled a dim smile. "Nobody's ever accused *me* of defrauding the public. Thank you for the hospitality. You're entertaining above your means. Next week, at the F.C.C. hearing, I'll have more to say." Patting Bea, Wylie walked towards the exit that led to the estuary pathway.

"You conniving bastard!" Arnold called after him. "You. . . damn it all." The no-longer-jolly manager turned to his staff.

"Don't let him bother you. Have fun," Arnold ordered his subdued employees. "I'll be right back." With a scowl he left the office suite in the direction of the rest rooms.

"A good time to powder my nose," said Bea Timmons. Casually detaching herself from Collin's grip, the blonde newscaster walked into the same corrider.

"Arnold and Beatrice! Who'd ever have suspected?" Collin lamented with exaggerated gloom.

Sherry wrinkled her forehead. "It's either love or kidneys."

"Two by two," Reuben added. "Like Noah's Ark, eh, Dr. Massengale?"

The question surprised the minister. "Surely," he answered. "Though Arnold and Beatrice are undoubtedly going their separate ways." He himself seemed anxious to leave.

"You're the expert, Doctor. The sagacious dominie. Tell me, how many creatures *did* scramble into the Ark. I'm thinking of the rest room concession at a dime a stall."

"Reuben, my friend," the white-haired commentator sounded inspired, "use simple arithmetic. Take the number of species which existed before the flood and multiply by two." He held up one finger, then a second, and bowed to his friends. "Excuse me." He stepped into the corridor.

"Contagious," Sherry laughed. "Praise Allah, I'm immune, since I don't drink." Collin gulped down his highball. As he, too, stepped through the office door, he announced, "I'm going *upstairs* to the studio. When I tape a show, I put away my keys and coins. Time to retrieve them."

The other partygoers caroused without interruption. Despite the small processional—R.E. Wylie, Arnold Owen, Bea Timmons, Dr. Massengale and Collin Dunnett—nothing in the crowd's volume showed anyone's absence. Reuben scouted the room. Featured on the television monitors was a receptionist trying to balance a toothpick parasol on her chin. The parasol was winning.

"Now that we're alone, Sher-y..."

"You want me to recommend a good book. What's an honest girl to do?" Sherry swung her hips. "Except join the ladies." She, too, walked towards the rest rooms.

Deserted, Reuben crossed to the bar, half-filled his glass with Scotch and added ice cubes. A crimson glow enriched the room, making even pallid faces ruddy.

" 'Sunset and evening star,' " Reuben recited. "But not through a streaked window." He left the bar and walked to the corridor. "No one's back." A set of glass doors—from the building's rear lobby to the outside air—led

him onto the bayside walkway. "A shame to keep that sunset for myself."

Past the low, irregular skyline on the far side of the water, the horizon blazed sumptuously. On the wall that bounded the walkway gleamed something metallic. Reuben walked closer. Steel-framed eyeglasses, with one cracked lens. "*Arnold Owens?*"

Reuben reached for them but hesitated. "Crab fisherman, perhaps."

Glancing over the wall, Reuben recoiled. Fifteen feet below, tumbled face up on the rocks, with waves slapping at his feet, lay R.E. Wylie. The blood from a neck slash drained away with his life.

"My *God*!" Reuben gasped.

From Wylie would burst no more attacks on Channel 22. His body twitched with the small jerky movements of the killed but not yet dead. Reuben straddled the wall, anxious to help, unwilling to trample the crime scene.

"*I'll be right back,*" he shouted. Dusk became real.

"Doctor," moaned the stricken man.

Patting the air helplessly, Reuben said, "We need an ambulance."

Pink froth bubbled from Wylie's mouth as he tried thick-tongued and straining against the sea noises, to argue with the glowing sky. Reuben arched forward to hear the final words, garbled by pain.

"No...no. *Ache... Creased... Wrecker...*" Wylie sobbed. His last audible sound was "*Uhhh!*"

Other than Reuben the walkway was deserted, a cyclone fence blocked the north end but the south end was open to the parking lot. Anyone could have come, killed and gone. Or circled around and rejoined the party.

Reuben cautioned himself not to touch the eyeglasses. "Just a minute," he promised the dead man.

Skirting the KRKN office, where the party continued noisily—and where the possible killer could have overheard him—Reuben slipped along a side corridor to a pay phone.

"Not an accident. That throat was *slashed*," he told the police dispatcher. Beeps from the telephone assured him his report was being recorded.

Sirens comforted him a few moments later as he stood sentry at the murder site. With the Hall of Justice close to the waterfront, response was quick—police emergency units and an unmarked inspector's car. To the party-goers, the wailing would mean only that the drawbridge was being raised again. No one inside paid attention.

"But one of them's dangerous," Reuben reminded himself.

Reuben's on-camera, off-

camera training helped him to give a full short report to the two plainclothesmen who questioned him. Inspector Guinn was heavy and dark, in a dull brown suit. Inspector Gowdy was slim and dark, in a blue pullover sweater and red-checked pants. The officers teamed up easily.

"Any chance you got the words wrong?" asked Gowdy.

"Sure," Reuben admitted. "The estuary's noisy and Wylie was choking on blood. But I heard it."

"*Ache.* He was hurting bad."

"*Wrecker?*" Guinn questioned the message. "*Slasher's* more likely. and *creased?* No. You better try again."

"Delirious," Reuben suggested as they strolled along the walkway. "Dying and worrying about his suit getting wet. Idiotic thoughts at desperate times. When I phoned you, with a man dying, I hated to put a quarter into the slot instead of a dime."

"Maybe. Let's talk to your friends."

Party noises lowered to a buzz when Reuben entered the office suite with the officers—the two inspectors and one uniformed patrolman who stood quietly at the door, awaiting others.

"We'll start with the bunch that quarreled with the deceased."

"Not really a quarrel..."

"Get 'em."

Arnold Owen was already hurrying over, his lips agitated with silent questions. Near a floral display, Bea Timmons and Dr. Massengale were debating whether bad news *inevitably* crowded good news from television. Sherry Stanton, who was nudging an anchovy from a deviled egg, blushed at Reuben.

"I apologize," she said. "I thought you went home without saying goodbye."

We've got trouble, Sherry. Where's Collin?"

"Where he said he'd be, I imagine. Upstairs in the studio. Why?"

Signaling to the patrolman, Inspector Gowdy answered, "Because somebody just killed somebody nobody liked."

Party noises ended. The officer's report was short and harsh. A moment later, the patrolman led Collin Dunnett into the room.

"He was upstairs, Inspector. Said he was checking lights."

"Alone?"

Annoyed, Collin snapped, "What *is* this? A bed check?"

Reuben tried to pacify him with hand signals. Collin's head-shaking indicated he understood nothing.

"Wylie's been killed,"Reuben said. He gestured at the small cluster of people mustered about the officers. We're under suspicion."

Inspector Guinn passed out printed three-by-five inch cards.

"Read your warning cards along with me, then sign 'em and give 'em back." By rote, Guinn recited the *Miranda* admonitions. "Now, who saw Wylie after he walked out of the party?"

Bea shook her head. Like the blonde newscaster, everyone else joined in a wordless headshake. Under the flourescent ceiling lights, they appeared bluishly pale, frightened.

"Who do these belong to?" Guinn asked. He pointed to a brand-new Polaroid photograph taken at the estuary wall. "Somebody probably can't see too well without 'em."

As the others looked vague, Arnold searched his pockets. "I had them a moment ago," he said. "My eyeglasses. The lens wasn't cracked."

"Dropped 'em when you went outside?"

"I never once went outside. Don't twist..."

"Well," Bea Timmons spoke slowly, forcing her memory. "I remember those glasses on the desk there. They got picked up."

Everyone waited for Bea to finish. She *had* finished. Suddenly noticing their disappointment, she apologized. "How can you tell one hand from another?"

"So Mr. Owen could've picked up his own glasses and misplaced 'em again," Guinn mused.

Gowdy added, "Makes sense to me."

"The *hell* you say!" Arnold Owen shouted. "That damned Wylie. He can't even die clean."

Dr. Massengale took Arnold by the shoulders. Compassionately, the judicious minister looked at him and cautioned, "Arnold, I'm afraid you'll have to answer for evil desires against R.E. Wylie. But we know you wouldn't have killed him."

"*Somebody* did," Gowdy interrupted.

From outside the window, police floodlights reminded the group that other men were gathering more evidence. No one from Channel 22 wanted to appear too curious...

"The weapon?" Reuben couldn't wait any more. "Did you find it?"

The inspectors answered in tandem, "Not yet."

"Maybe never. That's a muddy estuary."

"And the receptionist doesn't know what happened to her letter opener."

Startled, Sherry held tightly to Reuben. "The one like a Turkish sword. Earlier tonight, it was in the IN box."

"Where anyone bound for the rest rooms could've taken it. A weapon of opportunity," Gowdy announced. "The safest kind."

Arnold Owen pushed up to Inspector Guinn and the uniformed officer drew close. "Stop your innuendoes," Arnold demanded. "There are muggings

every day in San Francisco. By complete strangers."

"Didn't the deceased have something on you, sir?" Guinn queried. The "sir" was overemphasized.

Arnold turned up his palms. "I wouldn't know, officer. He *said* he did. He never gave me details."

"Somebody on the staff," Reuben suggested. "Wasn't that it?"

"Yes," Arnold looked unhappy. "he hinted — hinted — hinted that somebody here tricked me. How or why was a mystery. I thought he wanted me to investigate everybody and drive the staff crazy." Perspiration filmed his red cheeks.

"My ex-wife's vetted me quite enough, thank you," Collin told himself louder than he realized.

Reuben stepped into the center of the horseshoe which the group had formed. "One of us *is* a fraud," he said. "On that I'd bet. Someone so anxious to get away he has to risk blending into the crowd or call attention to his escape."

The Channel 22 people all looked at each other, a team no more. "*He* had to mean Arnold Owen, Dr. Massengale or Collin Dunnett. Not Bea Timmons, not Sherry Stanton. At the inspectors' nods, Reuben continued.

"Arnold told a joke about a bank teller. 'Why would he shout to keep a secret?' I asked. Now I know. Making yourself conspicuous can be a great disguise. You'd think that someone on the run would avoid a television station, wouldn't you? But no one searches for runaways in his living room."

"Anyone in the audience," Sherry protested, "might..."

"Might notice a resemblance, Reuben conceded. "Only he'd write it off to coincidence. It's when someone hides his face that we think he has something to hide."

Dr. Massengale sonorously reached out to his small congregation. "Each of us has something to hide—physical or spiritual—until we cleanse our guilt."

"In this case"—Reuben looked grim—"the cleansing should be done in the gas chamber. Picture R.E. Wylie dying. Throat cut, voice gurgling. He wasn't worried about being *wrecked*. He didn't cry out *wrecke*. "*Record!*" That's what I heard. *R-e-c-o-r-d*! Somebody's got a police record."

"Who?" Inspector Gowdy sounded indifferent. Nearly everybody he met had one.

"Reading is a fine occupation," Reuben slid away from the direct question. The group fidgeted. "Did you know that you have to add salt or chrism—that's olive oil and balsam—to water to make it holy water?"

Collin sounded disgusted.

"You have to add raw egg to meat loaf or it falls apart. So what?"

"The same person who insisted that holy water was pure, with nothing added, also told me that Noah took two of every creature into the Ark."

Politely, Bea Timmons said, "Noah did do that. I believe it."

"Wrong," Reuben shushed her. "A religious scholar would know differently. Look in Genesis, whatever. I can't recall the chapter. The Lord commanded Noah to take *unclean* beasts by twos, male and female. *Clean* beasts by sevens! How's my exegesis, Dr. Massengale? Any quarrel with these Biblical explanations?"

The smooth-skinned, snowy-maned commentator stood immobile, whether frightened, contemplating a slander suit or asking Heaven to forgive Reuben, no one could tell.

"Pray go on," urged Collin.

"Wylie's words. They're clear enough now. *Ache... creased...* No pain, no soggy clothing. He was naming his killer, with a mouth full of blood. *Ache... creased... wrecker...* Play with the sounds a moment. *Fake priest,* with a *record.*"

Sternly, courteously, the officers wedged Dr. Massengale between them. Who knew the story made sense? The minister, appearing compassionate, spoke quietly.

"How surprising a tale. Won't it be embarrassing when I grind it to dust?" Yawning, he covered his mouth with his hand.

Bea gasped. "The ring. His star sapphire! That's how you can tell one hand from another. By the jewelry. Of course! I *saw* Dr. Massengale pick up Arnold Owen's glasses."

Massengale continued his yawn uninterruptedly, his eyes flickering to the officers around him. "My lady," he finally said, "this ring belonged to a penitentiary guard in Illinois. I knew I should have left it with his body two years ago. Reuben, you read more widely than I ever imagined."

"All right," Inspector Guinn shoved Massengale against a wall for a patdown. "The rest of you, please drive your own vehicles. Sixth floor, Hall of Justice. We need your statements."

Before leaving, Reuben and Sherry, hand-in-hand, strayed to an empty corner of the KRKN office. The portable camera was locked away, the monitors dark, the party stragglers subdued.

"Oh, Reuben, what a field day the F.C.C. would have had with an escaped lifer as religious editor."

"He knew one thing. I *do* read too much. *Curiosities of the Bible,* indeed." Reuben took her in his arms. "Who can find a virtuous woman for her price is far above potato chips?"

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by K.L. JONES

Evans Learns the Hard Way that Sometimes It doesn't Pay to Do the Police's Homework for Them.

WHEN HE ENTERED the apartment through the window he had pried open, he immediately sensed the unnatural silence. He was used to stillness. Stillness was a part of his job. But this was a deeper stillness, an absolute stillness. He stood silently in the darkness by the opened window. His left hand was tensed around the flashlight. He flicked it on and panned it quickly across the room.

The instant he saw her, he turned the light off. She was on the couch and his instinct had been to turn off the light rather than risk waking her. His instinct also told him to retreat back through the window.

But the image he had seen in that split second of illumation told his intellect that he didn't have to worry about her. He inhaled deeply, paused, and then turned the light on the couch again. The woman's unnatural position, her contorted torso, and her opened eyes, this all told him she was dead.

Cautiously, he approached the body. It was warm and pliable. She hadn't been dead long. Judging from the red welts on the neck,

she had been strangled. He played his light across the table next to the couch and noted two glasses and an ashtray filled with cigaret butts. Half the butts were filter-tipped and these had lipstick stains. The others were unfiltered. He bent down and examined them closely. They were Pall Malls.

Suddenly, it dawned on him that he was in no position to conduct an investigation of a crime scene. First of all, he didn't know what to look for. Secondly, he certainly couldn't call the crime lab for advice. He decided to get the hell out of there. . .

The next day, John Evans, professional burglar, read the papers. There was nothing in the morning paper but buried in the middle pages of the afternoon paper there was a column and a half beneath the headline: *Northside Victim, Dead in Burglary Attempt.*

Her name had been Susan Davis. She was twenty-seven years old and had been strangled. According to the paper, the last person to see her alive had been her employer, one Robert Chase, described as an executive of Mortson Fabricators, Inc. He had driven her home and seen her safely to the door of her apartment. That was according to an unidentified police source.

Chase was quoted directly as saying that they had worked late that day and he had driven her home and walked her to her door because "She said there'd been a lot of burglaries in her neighborhood and she was afraid. If I'd known how right she was to be afraid. . ."

The next paragraph quoted a homicide investigator, Donald Carlson, in support of the burglary theory. "There was evidence of forced entry through a window off the fire-escape. We've picked up some pretty good leads from the apartment itself and our burglary squad is pretty sure it knows who's been working that neighborhood. Putting it all together, I'm pretty sure we can break this case in a week or so."

It was cool in the bar where Evans read the paper. But the air-conditioning didn't stop him from sweating. *My God!* he thought. *They might pin this on me!*

It was dumb and he knew it. The offices of Mortson Fabricators were dark, deserted and, as an object of burglary, strictly a waste of time. But then, he wasn't looking for anything to steal, which actually made it even dumber. He knew he should be lying low and hoping that the cops would pin the murder on the right guy. What could he do about it, anyway? He didn't even know what he was looking for.

He saw a notice on a bulletin board about the funeral arrangements. Somebody named Janis was collecting money for flowers, and anyone who wanted to go to the funeral could take the afternoon off.

Evans moved on. He found the

office door with the name Chase on it and went in. He still didn't have the slightest idea what he was looking for and didn't recognize it even when he saw it the first time.

He played his light across the top of the desk. There were scattered papers, a photograph of a woman with two kids, probably Chase's family, a pack of cigarets. Nothing registered as being important, so he began to go through the desk. Some impulse made him return the light to the desk top.

The pack of cigarets — Pall Malls, unfiltered.

Okay, he thought, so Chase had lied about just walking Susan Davis to her door. Chase had a wife, and by the desk photograph, a couple of kids. He was playing with Ms. Davis. It was the old triangle.

Evans could guess what happened. Susie was making demands on Chase. Panic, anger or whatever — the result was one dead secretary.And Chase might even get away with it.

Evans tried to convince himself that the cops wouldn't have missed the cigarets. The clue was too blatant. Yet if they were looking to hang this on a burglar, particularly on a certain burglar who had been working that neighborhood . . .

As a burglar, John Evans held the opinion that cops were dumb. He had been nailed twice, but didn't put it down to intelligent police work. Once a "partner" had ratted on him. The other time, an overly eager patrol cop had seen lights moving through a darkened house and simply waited for him to come out.

Yeah, cops were dumb. They were so dumb they probably would pin it on him.

They had already decided it was a burglar. He knew how they'd go about investigating the case. They'd just hit the pavement and put all kinds of pressure on the fences. This was a murder, so they could focus a lot of heat. No fence was going to stand up to it.

There was no way to extend a receiving stolen property charge to murder. But once they got you in one of those interrogation rooms, they could make you believe anything. They could convince you that your mother had fingered you for the Lincoln assassination. And more than likely get you to sign the confession.

Evans tried to tell himself there was no way they could put him in that apartment. He had worn gloves, so there could be no prints. He couldn't think of anything else. But, oh, hell, there was always *something.*

Evans felt sudden terror. For the first time in his career, he was terrified that they would get him for something he hadn't done.

The next day, he made a mistake.

He went back to the apartment building and went in through the

front door. There was no reason for him to go there. He knew that. He should just get out of town. But he thought, he hoped, he could get some information from the neighbors. He had to do something.

"Susan Davis," the old lady said. She was the only tenant to answer the knock. "It's really so sad, isn't it? I mean she was so young and so attractive. I do hope you catch the burglar that did it."

Evans winced, then tried to interrupt her monologue, "Uh, mam. . ."

"I can't really say I knew her," the lady continued, "and I'm sure *I've* told the other officers everything I knew about her."

"Well, mam. . ."

"Isn't it terrible? I mean the kind of things that can happen? Even in your own apartment?"

"Well, mam, *please*. I'd just like to ask a couple of questions."

"Well, young man, like I said, I really didn't know her. Or anything about her. I'm not the type to pry, you know."

"Yes, mam.What I'd like to know was if you ever saw her with any men."

The answer took approximately fifteen minutes. What it came down to was — yes, men had visited Susan. Some of them had even stayed quite late. Yes, there was one particular man, lately. No, she couldn't really describe him. She then went on to give a detailed description.

It was almost as difficult to get the lady to stop talking as it had been to get her on the subject he was interested in. Finally, he managed to get out of the apartment. He was quite satisfied with himself. He had a description and all he had to do was find out if it fitted Chase.

He was quite satisfied with the results. He didn't realize how bad a mistake he had made until after he passed the two men on the stairs outside the building.

"Hey, *you!*" An authoritative voice sounded from behind him. He froze and the two men came up to him. They didn't have to tell him. Evans knew they were cops.

"What's your name," one of them asked.

"John Evans," he said.

"You live here?"

"Eh, no. I was just. . ."

"Just what?" one of them asked. "What were you doing here?"

"I, er. . ."

"Never mind. Just get against that car. I think you know the position."

Oh, God! Evans thought. *They got me now.*

As he was being frisked, Evans had to speak, even though he knew it was hopeless.

"Look, I can help you guys. I know who did it."

"Who did what?"

"The murder. I know who murdured Susan Davis."

"So do we, sport. So do we. Get into the car. We'll talk about it down town."

The next twenty-four hours were unreal. The interrogation never stopped except for short periods of time spent in the lockup. There was a dinner that didn't stop the questions. They had him and they knew it. His answers, true as they were, sounded like lies even to him.

The most unreal touch of all was when they released him.

He knew that the cops had him on a string and that he could be yanked in any minute. They had his own words putting him in the apartment. He really could be nailed for the murder. He had to get out of it; get away from it. And there seemed to be only one way to do that.'

"Mr. Chase, there's a Mr. Evans here to see you," the girl said as she ushered him into an office that looked familiar.

"Yes, Mr. Evans. What can I do for you?"

"So that's Susie's replacement," Evans said noting how accurate the old lady's description had been.

"Eh, yes, now what can I do for you?"

"You can tell me about Susan," Evans said, closing the door. "And why you killed her."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Are you a policeman?"

Evans laughed.

"Me a cop? That's a real joke."

"Look, I'm busy. What is this about?"

"Okay, Chase, I'll make it simple for you. I know you killed Susan Davis. I know it and I can prove it."

"You must be crazy," Chase said.

"Maybe," Evans said. "*Maybe.* But I want you to tell me about it. Tell me why. . ."

Chase was sweating. Evans was enjoying it, but he didn't want to overplay it. He hadn't come there just to make Chase sweat.

"*I* know you were sleeping with her. Did your wife know?" Evans asked, pointing to the photograph on the desk.

"I still don't know what you're talking about. You say you're not a police officer."

"No. I'm not a cop. I'm just someody who does a lot of reading. I read all kinds of things. Like Susan Davis' diary."

"Diary?" Chase asked almost in a whisper. "I didn't know she had a diary."

"And you're lucky that the cops still don't know that. In fact, so far as I know, you and I are the only ones who know. You know because I just told you. And I know because I have it."

"What?"

Evans ignored the question.

"I can't say Miss Davis was a great writer, but at least she picked interesting topics. The parts about you are really good."

"I have no idea of what you are

talking about,"Chase said.

But Evans could see that Chase had at least some ideas about the topic of the conversation.

"It's all down in her own handwriting,"Evans said. "Something about you promising to leave your wife. Imagine you doing that, even with your father-in-law owning this place."

Evans paused but Chase said nothing.

"The whole thing is just like a soap opera. Only the soaps usually don't include murder."

"If you have this diary, why don't you take it to the police"

"Oh, I'm sure they'd be interested, but you see, I'm a businessman. I know the police won't pay anything for this. I assume you would."

"I don't believe this," Chase said, feigning indignation. "You're trying to blackmail me."

Evans said nothing. He just stared coolly at Chase. He was sure he was going to be able to pull it off.

"How do I know there *is* a diary? And how did *you* get it," Chase asked finally.

Evans could say nothing to prove the existence of the diary, since as far as he knew none really existed.

He stared at Chase for a second, then said, "I suppose the police told you they were looking for a burglar who had been in the apartment."

Chase said nothing. He opened a desk drawer and as he did so Evans tensed. He came out with a pack of Pall Malls. He took a cigaret out and lit it.

"If there is a diary, why would there be anything in it about me," Chase finally asked.

"We both know the answer to that," Evans said.

"Okay — then, where is it?" Chase asked.

"You can't seriously expect me to answer that," Evans said. "At least not until we've got some type of agreement."

Another pause. Chase ground his cigaret out in the ashtray that sat on his desk.

"How much do you want?"

"You name a figure," Evans said,"I'm a reasonable man."

"A thousand," Chase said. "That's all I can raise this afternoon."

Evans smiled coolly.

"That's not very much. Maybe if we put the trade off until midnight tonight, you can make it three grand."

Chase said nothing. "Just be here at midnight. With the money. I'll have the diary and we'll make a trade."

"You still haven't proved to me that there is a diary. Or that you have it," Chase said. "Why should I believe you?"

Evans arose from the chair he'd been sitting in.

"Why Mr. Chase, *you* can trust *me*. I'm an honest man. See you

tonight. At midnight."

In the dark, the offices of Mortson Fabricators seemed even more familiar than they had in the afternoon. Evans moved slowly across the secretarial area. He noted the light coming from the half closed door to Chase's office. There were no definable noises, but Evans could sense the presence of others.

He had waited five minutes after seeing Chase arrive. Then he had entered through the door which Chase had thoughtfully left unlocked. Now he sat on the secretarial desk nearest Chase's office. He counted slowly to a hundred. Still he waited.

He heard a rustling noise from the hallway and immediately struck out with his foot, kicking a waste basket. The metallic can bounced off a near by desk and clattered across the floor.

Chase appeared in his office doorway and immediately the room was flooded with light. After his eyes adjusted to the abrupt change, Evans noticed the switch by Chase's door.

"Good evening, Mr. Chase," Evans said. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

Chase was standing in the doorway with his right shoulder concealed by the door frame.

"Where's the diary?" he asked.

"Right here, Evans said patting the windbreaker he was wearing.

"Give it to me," Chase said.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Evans asked.

Chase shifted himself toward the center of the doorway and deliberately raised his right arm. He was holding what looked to Evans like the world's biggest forty-five utomtic.

"You know something," Chase said,"The first one is hard. But it seems they get easier. Susie was a bitch. She would have destroyed me. I couldn't let her do that. So she died. I'm not going to let her destroy me from the grave."

Evans tensed, ready to move, but realized there was no place to go that a bullet wouldn't beat him to. Staying tense, he listened, not only to Chase but for the sounds he had heard earlier.

"I'm not even angry with you," Chase continued. "You're just a cheap hoodlum trying to make a fast buck. Too bad, but you're going to have to die."

Chase had stopped talking. His right hand shook slightly. Evans had heard the slight noise of movement behind him but didn't try to look over his shoulder.

"All right, Chase," he heard the voice that had spent so many hours interrogating him. "Drop it."

Chase's hand moved. The weapon was no longer aimed at Evans so he looked over his shoulder and saw the detective standing in the office entrance way. The officer had a gun pointed in Chase's direction.

Briefly, the thought that he was

in the middle flashed through Evans' mind.

"You can't do anything," the cop said. "Even if you got by me, there's two backup units outside."

Chase dropped his gun.

"Jesus, you'd make a lousy burglar!" Evans said. "You made a lot of noise coming down that hallway."

"That's why you kicked the wastebasket, huh?" the detective said as he moved to put handcuffs on Chase.

"Am I glad this is over!"Evans said, moving slowly toward the outer doorway. "You got enough on him, for sure."

Evans stopped moving when the second detective came into the doorway and grabbed his arm.

"Going someplace?" this cop asked."

"Yeah," Evans sighed, "I guess so. But I hope it won't be for too long."

"Well," the cop said philosophically, "we've got your confessions on some burglaries, but we'll tell the judge how you cooperated with us."

He pulled Evans' arms to his back and fastened handcuffs on his wrists.

"Yeah," Evans said,"I risked my life for you guys. Maybe the judge'll give me probation."

"It'll be more like two to six," the cop said, pushing Evans toward the door. "Still you're going to get off a hell of a lot easier than Chase."

COMING—in the January issue of MSMM—

CONTRACT ON A CORPSE

The New MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Quick Change

by CRAIG WEEDEN

Sam Bowie Was so Smart He Actually Outsmarted Himself.

SAMUEL BOWIE sat at a window table in the coffee shop of the crowded metropolitan terminal. As the Portland bus eased into the berth opposite Gate #4, Sam finished the last of his coffee, checked his hair in the reflection in the chrome napkin dispenser, stood, then carefully buttoned his knee-length leather overcoat.

"Time," he said to no one in particular, "to go to work."

The first passenger Sam approached was, he figured, a college student. And what a student! The kid looked as if he could lift a house. He must have gone six-foot-six, two hundred and fifty pounds. Yeah, but big is dumb. Sam thought, and I ain't either.

"Hey, man," Sam said, holding out four quarters in his small hand toward the student, "can you give me a dollar for these?"

The huge young man stopped, looked around as if he thought Sam might be speaking to someone else, then slowly lowered two appropriately huge suitcases to the floor.

"Why — ah, sure."

As the student awkwardly wrestled with a jammed zipper on his bright red parka — "It'll only take a minute, mister. This thing's always getting stuck!" — Sam studied his victim. The boy glowed with the fresh scrubbed honesty typical of all the students at the Bible college north of Portland. Sam had always found them the easiest marks. They were too honest to suspect anything.

"Here! Here it is." The young man pulled a soiled and wrinkled bill from his wallet and offered it to Sam.

"You won't mind," said Sam, dropping a pile of counterfeit coins into the student's beefy hand, "taking these dimes instead will you? I just realized I need the quarters for the cigaret machine."

"Well, I —" The student squinched up his face as if attempting to remember the answer to some difficult exam question.

"Go ahead. Count them. They're all there."

Lowering his head obediently, the student began. "One —"

Sam did not hear the counting continue. He gracefully worked his way between the disembarking passengers and was absorbed almost instantly in the rush of commuters. Quick change strikes again, he said to himself. Sam you are *too* much.

An old lady was next. Then two chubby coeds. Sam slipped their money into his pocket. Strange, he thought, how people worry about being shorted a dime while I'm taking them for the whole dollar.

Sam made the change eight more times before he headed back to the coffee shop to let things cool off a bit. As he entered, he stopped to drop a quarter into the jukebox. Noting his reflection in the mirror above the machine, Sam wondered if he didn't really belong in Hollywood. Perhaps he could be a star. His delicate fingers glided lightly over the keys until he decided on J-8, a disco tune.

Sam boogied his way to a stool at the counter. As he danced he felt the roll of bills in his pocket bounce against his leg. It had been a good day for the quick change. In fact, one of the best.

"Yeah," Sam said to the waitress. Better pour me a coffee. It's been a long day, too long. And a tired man makes mistakes."

"But Sam," the waitress said in mock alarm, "you keep telling me a man as bright as you never makes mistakes!"

"Come on, honey. Get serious. Do I look like the kind of guy who goes around making mistakes?" Sam snugged the knot of his hand painted silk tie up to the collar of his elegant shirt, then unbuttoned his overcoat to reveal a black cashmere blazer and flannel trousers.

"Sam. you always dress out of sight."

"Yeah. And I'm pretty, too. How come you never notice?"

"Oh, Sam! I notice everything."

"Well then you better notice that guy in the corner. He's about to die from lack of service."

Sam watched the black liquid slosh in the glass pot as the woman walked away. He sighed, then lowered his head onto his arms, which were resting on the counter. He closed his eyes.

These long days were brutal, Sam thought, especially with having to go to the bank so often to exchange the dollar bills for twenties. But at least the roll was manageable and the coat didn't bulge.

Sam dropped his right hand to his side and patted his pocket. With the twelve bills he had just taken in, his total for the day was nearly four hundred dollars. Sam grinned.

"Mister —"

"Huh? What —" Sam sat up quickly, spilling his coffee. He spun around on the stool and looked up. "You want something?"

A large young man looked Sam straight in the eyes. "You made a mistake, mister."

Sam suddenly recognized the bright red parka he had seen earlier. The college student, Sam thought, had figured out the con!

Sam looked for a way to escape. There was none. He was trapped between the counter and his accuser. He watched, horrified, as the student pulled a huge fist from his parka pocket. His fingers were as thick and round as sausages. Sam's hands moved unconsciously upward to protect his face.

"Hey, wait a *minute!* Let's talk this over!" Sam imagined the student's fist smashing into his face, flattening his nose, knocking out his teeth. "We can make a deal!"

"Look, mister —" The kid stepped closer.

"Wait! *Wait! Listen*, big feller. Tell you what. Here, *you* take this!" Sam took the roll of bills from his pocket and gave it to the student. "*Take* it! It's yours. I want you to have it!"

The boy's fingers closed around the money, covering the roll completely. Sam dabbed at the sweat on his face with a handkerchief. He felt as though he were going to vomit.

"Look out, I'm gonna be sick!"

To Sam's amazement the college boy stepped back and in an instant Sam had slipped past and was heading for the door. Once in the terminal's main lobby, Sam broke into a run. He jostled his way to the street and kept going.

"You want some coffee?" the waitress asked the college student as she cleaned the counter where Sam had sat.

"No," the student answered. "No thanks." He looked at the roll of bills in his hand. "Funniest thing just happened."

"What's that?" the waitress said without looking up.

"I was trying to return two extra dimes that guy gave me. . ."

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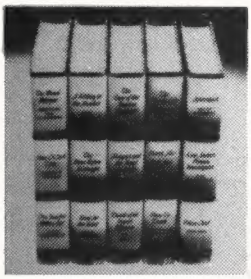

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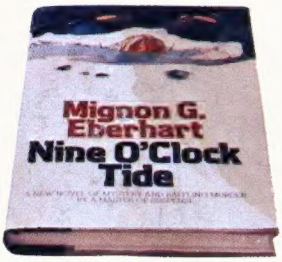

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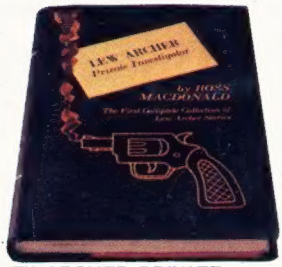

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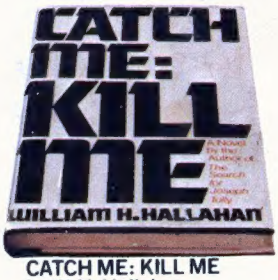

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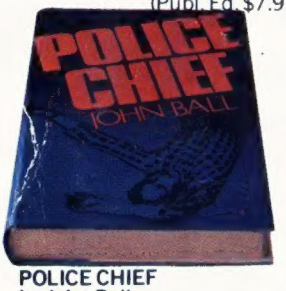

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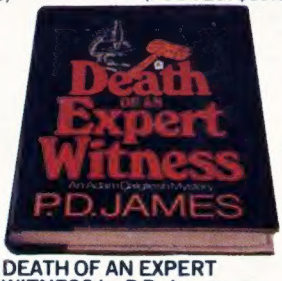

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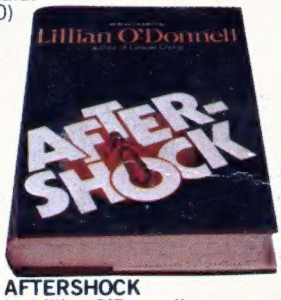

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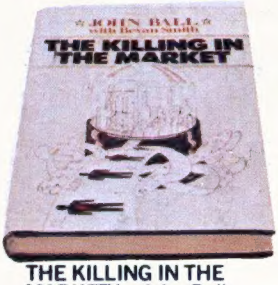

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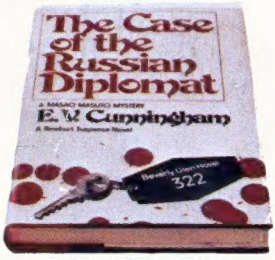

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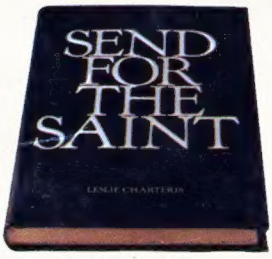

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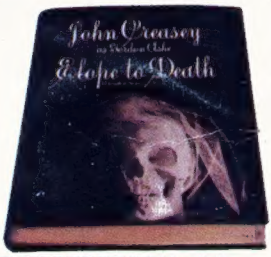

ELOPE TO DEATH by John Creasey as Gordon Ashe.
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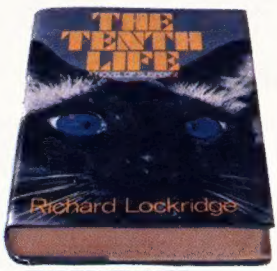

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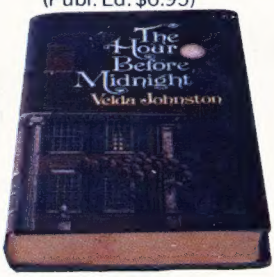

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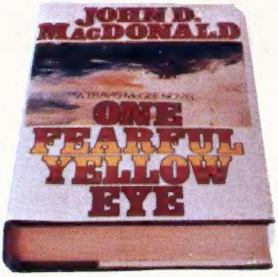

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